Shades of an uncivil education: teaching for political judgement in the wake of Brexit

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Outline for a paper

1. The Uncivil War
On 7 January 2019, Channel 4 broadcast Brexit: The Uncivil War, a drama written by James Graham. The programme, stretching across two evenings, dramatized the events leading up to and culminating in the referendum that took place in the UK on 23 June 2016.¹ It was advertised with some fervour as the first serious analysis of the present political mess, but, as the critics generally agreed, it did not fulfil its promise. Aside from the compelling characterisation of Dominic Cummings, the “master-mind” behind the “Leave [Europe]” campaign and now Chief Special Adviser to Boris Johnson, the drama relied too much on caricature and over-simplification. The dramatization revolved around the brilliant performance of Benedict Cumberbatch in this leading role and his dominance of a number of set-pieces, with comparatively slight attention to the complacency of Prime Minister David Cameron in calling the referendum, the cynical manipulation of popular opinion of the “leave” campaign, and the slow-footedness of politicians wishing to “remain”. As is well known, deep divisions over Europe persist in the major political parties, as in the country as a whole, and the programme offered little analysis of the fall-out from this. As Guardian journalist Lucy Mangan acidly remarked, “It is incumbent upon [the writer], in an era besieged and almost defined by misinformation, not to add to the chaos. . . Dramatists should find the next decade or so a grimly fertile one for narrative crops” (Mangan, 2019).

Of course, the real-life drama is likely to continue for some time. The 31 January 2020 saw the exit of the UK from the European Union, albeit that there lies ahead eleven months of negotiation that will determine much of what that exit amounts too. And perhaps we are too close to it to think clearly about it – that is, “we” in the UK and also, differently, in Europe as a whole, and then also, again differently, in the wider world. But it remains somewhat surprising how little response to Brexit there has been as yet in literature and the arts.

2. On the way to a diagnosis?
There is no shortage of scholarly articles in response to Brexit, many of them focusing on its economic impact, on its cultural significance, and specifically on its significance as demonstration of the new populism in politics. In the media too, there has been plentiful diagnosis of Brexit, highlighting causes that are now familiar: concern for sovereignty;

¹ The question that appeared on ballot papers was: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” Almost 52% voted to leave, and just over 48% to remain.
nationalism and xenophobia; and prevalence of the sentiment amongst some sectors of society that the new political/economic order “isn't working for us”. But such explanations seem insufficient to explain the self-harming aspects of what is happening. In answer to this, Kalypso Nikolaidis’ *Exodus, Reckoning, Sacrifice: Three Meanings of Brexit* (2019) stands out as an eloquent and sometimes dazzling exploration of what is happening at a deeper level. She considers three underlying themes.

This first is *Exodus*, and this is a story of British exceptionalism: “Brexit will be our catharsis,” as she characterises this, “a voyage from self-doubt to self-discovery. The old Anglosphere will be our new Jerusalem. . .” (pp. 19-20). On 31 January, Conservative MP Mark Francois stated in an interview that he was going to stay up all night, in order to see the sun rise over a country that was free again. The reference to the past here frequently chimes with a nostalgia for a time before membership of the European Union and perhaps for a time when it still made sense to talk of the British Empire.

Nikolaidis’ second theme is that of *Reckoning*, according to which Brexit is a symptom of a wider malaise. “Brexit is not just about Brexit, of course. . .”, as she puts this. “Europe is burning, Chaos is upon us, and the shockwave threatens to engulf our very foundations” (p. 75). Brexit was preceded by the possibility of Grexit, and now there is talk of Swexit, Nexit, and even Dexit – the flippancy of the neologising being significantly at odds with the gravity of the situation for Europe as a whole.

The third theme is that of *Sacrifice*. Everywhere one finds “revolutionary defeatism of the peacetime variety: the urge to make things as bad as possible in the hope that the worse they get, the greater the chance that the result will turn out in your favour” (156). There is here, with an element of nostalgia again, an appeal to the “war-time spirit”, when the nation pulled together, and the Protestant work ethic in its more perverse forms. At an early stage, Boris Johnson quipped: “We are going to make a titanic success of it” (120).

An eschatological quality runs through these themes, and this opens the way to a more direct focus on questions of sovereignty, authority, and meaning. Moving away from the current context of Brexit, my discussion turns to the response to these questions found in the writings of Eric Santner. Santner considers them in terms of the passage from political theology to secular modernity.

3. The liturgical labour of modern democracies

In *The Royal Remains: The People’s Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, Santner broaches his topic via a figure that he derives from Ernst Kantorowicz (1957): that of the “king’s two bodies”. One dimension of the body of the sovereign is a matter of its ordinary existence as the body of human being, needing sustenance, having capabilities, and being vulnerable to accident and contingency in the familiar ways. But the other dimension, which is not affected by the contingencies of health and circumstance, retains its symbolic importance until the demise of the natural body, at which point authority is retained through its passing directly to natural body of the heir. In Christianity, the mystical quality of this second body borrows from the idea of the mystical body of Christ and structures the idea of the “body politic”. A
supreme indication of its functioning is found that the body of the sovereign is required to be present at particular occasions – occasions whose ceremonial or ritual importance and authority accrue substantially from this presence of the sovereign. To name this importance “liturgical”, as Santner does, is to allude to the origins of royal authority in notions of divine right, while to speak of liturgical “labour” directs attention to the question of what happens to this authority when the figure of the sovereign is removed and replaced by the will of the people. The echoes of Marx in this reference to labour will soon become clearer.

Santner develops his argument around a reading of *The Death of Marat* by Jacques Louis David (1793). The painting depicts the dying moments of the journalist and French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat, and it became one of the most famous images of the revolution. Marat suffered from a rare skin condition, which required him to spend many hours in his bath. He was murdered there by Charlotte Corday, a member of a rival faction in the revolution. She did not attempt to escape and was subsequently executed. Jacques Louis David was a close friend of Marat, and he produced this painting quickly in the months following Marat’s death. David was evidently responsible also for orchestrating some of the more ceremonial aspects of the new revolutionary regime.

The painting can be read as the depiction of a martyr of the revolution, and in this respect it resembles earlier religious paintings. As political, it also contrasts in content with the substance of so much painting in the

Santner is concerned with sovereignty and authority. His particular emphasis is on the “liturgical labor” that, in modern democracies, is transferred from the sovereign’s body to that of the people. The point is to reveal the consequences of this changing relation to the body, and to explore this in terms not only of materiality but of capital, commodification, and fetish power: the liturgy and sacrament work through these as a (misplaced) outward sign of an inward grace.

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2 Kantorowicz writes: “The King has two Capacities, for he has two Bodies, the one whereof is a Body natural, consisting of natural Members as every other Man has, and in this he is subject to Passions and Death as other Men are; the other is a Body politic, and the Members thereof are his Subjects, and he and his Subjects together compose the Corporation. this Body is not subject to Passions as the other is, nor to Death, for as to this Body the King never dies, and his natural Death is not called in our Law the Death of the king, but the Demise of the King, not signifying by the Word Demise that the Body politic of the King is dead, but that there is a Separation of the two Bodies, and that the Body politic is transferred and conveyed over from the Body natural now dead to another Body natural” (Kantorowicz, 1957, p. 13).
immediately preceding centuries, whose subject matter was the depiction of kings, where what was painted was not so much the natural body of the kind as the symbolic body of the kind in idealised form. A striking contrast is evident also in that while the portrait of the king will typically dominate the canvas, filling the space, *The Death of Marat* leaves the upper half of the canvas empty of representation. This lack of representation can be interpreted as a suggestion of the removal of the tyranny of the monarch and an opening of space for representation of and by the people. But it registers at the same time an uncertainty, all to painfully evident at the time, as to how the people are to be represented.

This is to take representation in the familiar political sense (of the people’s participation in government though the election of representatives, etc.). But there is also a question of representation in another sense: what images are to be depicted, what symbolic forms will be displayed, as expressions of meaning and authority, now that the king has been beheaded? The ambiguity of Santner’s title, *The Royal Remains*, both refers to the dead body of the king and suggests that something of the royal, an aspiration of a quasi-religious kind – towards the transcendent, towards the divine – will not simply be expunged. The excess of this aspiration, beyond what natural bodies might need, coincides in some degree with Marx’s analysis of labour and surplus production. Marx provides a powerful account of the conditions of alienation under conditions of capitalist production and of the possibilities of overcoming this. What happens to this liturgical labour when there is no sovereign? What happens to representation? What fills this space?

One way in which the space is filled is with the cult of celebrity. The images that populate our shared world are no longer those of kings and queens, nor are they images of a religious kind. Capital, commodification, and fetish power are transmuted with the cult of celebrity, and its representations are brought to us especially by the activities of the advertising industry and marketing, as well, more recently, as through the ubiquity of the internet and social media.

In this new representational regime, the boundary between sign and substance is blurred, and fetish power accrues increasingly to the sign: the Nike flash is more important than the Nike shoe. The fetish power of the sign alters the character, power, and effects of public discourse, such that the soundbite and slogan displace discursive argument. “Brexit means Brexit” (Theresa May); and “Get Brexit done” (Boris Johnson) – these become art of a reassuring liturgy. A Conservative Party political broadcast prior to the UK election in December 2019 skilfully exploited the stylistic forms of social media: someone with an iPhone was following a busy Boris Johnson, busy in his shirt-sleeves, down a narrow corridor, watching him enter a kitchen and make a cup of tea (water straight from the hot tap, milk from the fridge), and plying him with questions, serious (the economy, sovereignty) and jocular (“Marmite – yes or no?”), to which he responded with repeated recourse to the phrase “Get Brexit done”. When, in the 1980s, Margaret Thatcher was questioned about the hostile reaction to the introduction to what was then known as the Poll Tax, she insisted that it was not the policy that was at fault but its presentation. In a sense she was
right – at least she was right in anticipating how important would be this triumph of sign over substance. Moreover, this is the way we are now taught to imagine ourselves – not just in the self-profiling and presentation prompted by social media but in the emphasis placed on self-marketing, the curation of a website, the manicuring of a CV.

4. The collusion of education

It is frequently complained that the 2016 referendum result reflected a lack of education on the part of voters. Many had little idea of the implications and effects of leaving, and they were encouraged, as Brexit: The Uncivil War rightly shows, to think in very simplistic terms. This left them vulnerable to the simplistic presentation of what was at stake and inclined to think in terms of its slogans and prejudices.

So was this a deficit in citizenship education? Explicit citizenship education in the UK has been shaped by the Crick Report (1997), albeit that policy has departed in various ways from that committee’s recommendations. But the received view continues to be that citizenship education should involve the acquisition of knowledge about the functioning of democracy, and about rights and responsibilities, the development of the skills needed to present one’s own point of view and fairly to represent those of others, and the fostering of the disposition to attend fairly to the views of others. All this seems reasonable enough, but there is a painful lack in terms of the coupling of this with a strong sense of history – relating particularly to the fact there is always a background of violence and bloodshed, and always injustice that continues to shape unevenly the lives of members of a democracy today. Citizenship education in countries with a history less stable than that of the UK have sometimes been more inclined to confront these realities.

But this is not the heart of the problem. The blank space of authority and meaningfulness that is left with the death of the king needs to be filled not with images of celebrity or the soundbites of populist politics. It requires a renewed faith in political discourse, understood in the broadest terms – not just in terms of manifesto’s and speech-making but where the political is seen to extend through the fabric of our lives, through our life with words. For our polis is a “city of words” (Plato), and it is open to us always to “improve the hour” (Emerson).

That improvement depends crucially on our trusting our words, on our not absolving ourselves from responsibility by adopting received points of view or the litany of stock-phrases and clichéd views that are passed along down the line. Such a trust must involve the confidence to exercise judgement, with the recognition that the vast range of problems in our political lives are not amenable to purely technical solution. So much in education, in conditions of performativity and in a culture of accountability, encourages the suppression of judgement and individual response in favour of the meeting of fixed criteria, in favour of the belief that a subject worthy of study can be contained in this way. While this is a suppression that affects the curriculum as a whole, it constitutes a repression of the humanities where they have most to offer – that is, where the engaging students in examining, responding to, and assessing the meaning-making practices of
human beings. These are practices where questions of meaning and authority come to the fore and can be intelligently addressed.

On this view, then, education colludes in a suppression of political thought and contributes to the filling of the void with a language that is etiolated and with representations that anaesthetise judgement and dull political thought.\(^3\)

5. Politics and modern art
There is reason to look again at *The Death of Marat*. In *Farewell to An Idea: Extracts from a History of Modernism*, Timothy Clark argues that this work can be seen as not just an, but the, inaugural painting of modernism in art. Clark writes:

> For my feeling is that what marks this moment of picture-making off from others (what makes it inaugural) is precisely the fact that contingency rules. Contingency enters the process of picture-making. It invades it. There is no other substance out of which paintings can now be made – no givens, no matters and subject-matters, no forms, no usable pasts. Or none that a possible public could be taken to agree on anymore. And in painting – in art in general – disagreement most often means desuetude.

> Modernism, as I have said, is the art of these new circumstances. It can revel in the contingency or mourn the desuetude. Sometimes, it does both. But only that art can be called modernist that takes the one or the other fact as determinant (Clark, 1999, p. 18).

Let me try to put this simply. For the painters of a century before the subject-matter and its codes were given: the portrait of the king, representing his position and authority, with its meaning clear to all. For Jacques Louis David there is the contingency of the moment, the details of the scene – the bath, dagger, letter, wooden crate, the blood and drapery, the closed eyes and slumped body, the pale skin. And then the blank space, the darkness of the wall behind, in which across what is virtually half the canvas nothing is represented.

What Clark explains also is the contingent circumstances relating to the unveiling of this painting. The unveiling of a painting – its release, we might say – had typically be a matter of privileged access. In the context of the revolution, however, David had presided over the choreographing of some of the marches and events. On 16 October, just a few hours after the execution of Marie-Antoinette, a march took place that led to the tomb of Marat, at which two of David’s paintings were displayed for the first time: his portrait of the martyred regicide, Michel Le Pelletier, and *The Death of Marat*. This is an orchestrated event improvised from the contingencies of circumstance, and it marks the people’s access to the unveiling of art.

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\(^3\) For a relevant discussion of elite university education, see William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep* (2015).
But, again to turn to the blank top half of the painting, this is modernism also in that the extent of the wall, the expanse of the shadow, deflects the attention, away from representation to the paint itself. The painter paints paint. It is not just the content or the codes of art that can no longer be taken for granted. The medium itself is put in question.

One can readily imagine that, for the viewer of the painting of the king, there was limited scope for interpretation, for so much about the context and purpose was clear, and the king’s authority was not for the most part in doubt. It is a characteristic of modernist works, by contrast, that those viewing them do not know where they stand in relation to them – at least, that this becomes a live question. But is this art? Is this music? Such responses arise across a range of art-forms, perhaps less so with literature because of the inevitably representational character of words. How significance is the parallel between the advent of democracy and these features of modernist art?

6. Democracy, modernism, and ordinary language philosophy
The trust in one’s words to which I have referred relates to what is known as ordinary language philosophy (OLP), where this is not a blind or idiosyncratic trust but depends upon testing out one’s reactions and responses against those of others. It relates not to the kind of dispute that can normally be settled by recourse to a dictionary, for it involves not so much the acquiring or securing of a new item in one’s vocabulary as the clarification through language of an aspect of our experience, which is to say also an aspect of the world. It has to do, as the formula goes, with what-we-say-when. When we say “involuntary”, we mean... But what is it that we mean? Not voluntary, to be sure. But does this then mean the same as “obligatory” or “compulsory”. Joining the army is in many circumstances a voluntary matter, but at a time of conscription, it is compulsory. Is it then involuntary? A sneeze is involuntary, but this seems so different. Is a sneeze obligatory or compulsory? Obviously not. And here, the point is, we are becoming clearer not just about the meaning of words but the fabric of our world. By contrast, I may be unclear about the meaning of “dromedary” (perhaps I do not know the word or maybe I have forgotten... Something like a camel? but one hump or two?), so I google and quickly settle the matter. But my problem with “involuntary” was not that I did not know the word: working through the differences, and testing my examples against yours, as well as against your objections to mine, helped me to become clearer about the world itself, the world as constituted through language. Our lives in language are such that this kind of learning – not just about individual words but about how a phrase is to be taken, about the effects of an insult or terms of praise, or a raised eyebrow or a laugh – is something to which we continue to be apprenticed. When Wittgenstein writes “A new-born child has no teeth.”—“A goose has no teeth.”—“A rose has no teeth” (Wittgenstein, 1953, II, xi, p. 221), it is not exactly that new information is being given but rather that the examples serve to show how the words open up contexts of use and aspects of reality in different ways, aspects that too great a faith in the dictionary (“has”, “no”, “teeth”) might hide.
Stanley Cavell has pressed the connection between philosophy of this kind and aesthetic modernism in various ways. As Jay Bernstein has put this:

From the outset Cavell has proclaimed an intimacy, at times amounting to a virtual identity, between the logic of aesthetic claiming (the logic appropriate to our claims, evaluative and interpretive, about works of art and, by extension, the logic of those works, their claiming) and the logic peculiar to ordinary language philosophy (‘what we say when’ and ‘what we mean when we say it’) (Bernstein, 2003, p. 107).

Modernism, which so significantly provided the cultural context within which Cavell developed his own thought, shares with Romanticism a commitment to what J.M. Bernstein has called cultural renewal via the “transfiguration of meaning” (Bernstein, p. 109): amongst other things, this means rejecting the assumption that the objective order (how things are for everyone) is separate from the subjective (how they look or seem to me). As Romantics and modernists alike have tried to show, those apparently merely subjective aspects of knowing and meaning are, in fact, ingredients in objective knowing and public meaning. Attention to the “jointure of orders of fact with orders of feeling,” which reveals the world as “an expressive empirical order,” restores hope for renewal (p. 122). In the modern world that order is “hounded,” as Bernstein puts it, from three different directions: the growing belief that meaning is a matter of mere convention; a modern reductive naturalism coupled with the belief that the only rational authority is of a form modelled by the natural sciences; and by “‘determined society,’ say, the consequences for social existence implied by the first two houndings” (p. 123.)

In the engagement of art and art criticism, judgements are offered not as expressions merely of individual preference but as appealing to a putative truth that others might come to see, yet where no proof is possible. In the procedures of ordinary language philosophy, samples of usage are considered in terms of convergences of empirical structure and affective significance in a manner that parallels the production and criticism of artworks: philosophy of this kind provides “a record of our response to such jointures – which is why we say what we do when we do” (p. 116), and they depict what Cavell has called our “conviction and connectedness with the world” (p. 117). They acquire their importance and urgency once “we have discovered that the task of making sense of our standing in the world is somehow wholly up to us” (Cavell, 1971, pp. 116-117).

The implications of this intimacy extend through Cavell’s work, especially in his conception of the political, which he develops with particular pertinence through the thematization of voice. In aesthetic

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4 Bernstein writes: “So aesthetics concerns, speaking crudely and indiscriminately, the sensible conditions of knowing and meaning, which is to say, sensuous or material meaning, the sensuous element of perceptual claims, and the perceptual element of objective cognitions, the subjective but not private conditions for objective knowing, what can be known only in sensing (MD, 191) or only known in or by feeling (MD, 192)” (p. 111).
judgement, not to speak in one's voice, to mimic another, is not only to 
accede to a kind of conformism but to render one's judgement void; in 
politics, it is to undermine the articulation of experience on which 
democracy depends. In the end this articulation depends upon testimony 
(“don't you see, don’t you hear, don’t you dig . . . Because if you do not see 
*something*, without explanation, then there is nothing further to discuss” 
(Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy”, 1969, p. 93)), but it is 
important that this is other than that more bland assertion that is a mark of 
the speaker's withdrawal ( “Well, I liked it” or “That’s what I think”) – a 
response that denies the responsibilities of criticism, frustrating political 
discussion, and courting isolation.\(^5\)

Cavell sees the distinct demand of modern art that it take the form of 
acknowledgement: this requires “my voicing my acknowledgement” and my 
regarding work and criticism as “exemplary individual performances” 
(Bernstein, p. 124); “The problem of the critic, as of the artist,” Cavell writes, 
“is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in 
agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways. Then his work outlasts the 
fashions and arguments of a particular age. That is the beauty of it” (Cavell, 
AP, p. 94). Such performances are moves in resistance against ideas of 
objectivity emptied of subjective engagement and in undoing “the 
psychologizing of psychology” (the business of cognitive operations) (pp. 91, 
93).\(^6,\)\(^7\)

Before moving on, it is worth asking what, in the context of 
modernism, has happened to those special occasions that often provided the 
content for earlier forms of painting. Special occasions are, as it were high 
points (that is, points of sharpened focus) when the liturgical labour is most 
on display. But in the philosophy we have been considering that labour is 
there in the ordinary fabric of our lives in language. To speak of the ordinary 
is not to refer primarily to the quotidian, in the manner of Michel de 
Certeau, for example. It is to differentiate ordinary language, as natural 
language, from any more refined currency – say, the realm of logic and from 
certain kinds of technical language (algorithms). Natural language, 
necessarily embedded in contingency, is a matter of occasions, not the 
grand occasions that painting once celebrated, but occasions of diverse and 
not necessarily special kinds – where the second syllable points to the 
different *cases* that arise, and to the *accidents* and *coincidences* that occur 
(Latin, *cado, cadere, cecidi, casum* – to fall). This is democratisation of a 
kind.

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\(^5\) But, as Bernstein also recognizes, it is appropriate also to allow that such responses can 
be given a different inflection. When the critic stops arguing, what is left can be seen as her 
testimony: (AP, 93)

\(^6\) For a thoughtful brief discussion of the background to this idea, see Arata Hamawaki, 
“Undoing the Psychologizing of the Psychological”, *Conversations: The Journal of Cavellian 
Studies*, 7, 2019. Online at: 
Accessed on 8 October 2019.

\(^7\) In “Music Discomposed”, Cavell writes: “the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience 
of fraudulence, is endemic in the experience of contemporary music: . . . its full impact, 
even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that 
time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed” (Cavell, 1969, p. 188).
7. Shades of an uncivil education

The argument developed in this paper reasserts the central importance in education of the arts and humanities. They are the subjects within which human meaning-making practices are considered and evaluated, and crucially they depend upon the progressive refinement of judgement, where judgement is not to be calibrated with a fixed standard or rule. Judgement of that kind is what democracy needs. Conversation and the development of voice (in the sense sketched here) are of critical importance in this. Trust in judgement depends upon sensitivity to fraudulence, in others and in oneself. Conversation is the arena in which I seek not so much to negotiate possibilities of cooperation over my predetermined goals and aspirations but rather to find out what those commitments might be.

The title of the television programme, Brexit’s Uncivil War, can draw attention in passing to the strange oxymoron that is “civil war”. “Civil education”, which might mean something like education for citizenship, would be no oxymoron, and in a sense this is what in my view education should generally be – that is, that the education of the individual is not to be separated from her preparation for life in community with others. But it seems likely that what is so prevalent now – in schools and, to some extent, universities – is so dominated by cultures of performativity and accountability that the impulse to conversation and judgement, and to finding one’s own voice, is repressed - repressed especially because part of the meta-lesson that is also learned is that such matters are best avoided for fear of missing the targets that have been clearly identified and set.

The danger is then that people are encouraged to live imitation or counterfeit lives, lives that for all their much vaunted “achievement” have not been taken up as their own. Dante’s Purgatory, an allegory for the world we know, is populated with what he calls “shades” (ombre), figures whose half-life is such that, being shadows, no shadow extends from them. Their words - unlike the words of embodied, say fully voiced, beings – do not extend, have nowhere to go.

References