



Home

Editorial

Authors'
Responses

Guidelines
For
Reviewers

About Us

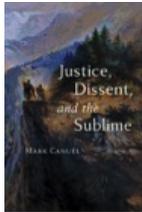
Masthead

Feedback

Search Every Field

Search

JUSTICE, DISSENT AND THE SUBLIME



By **Mark Canuel**
(Johns Hopkins, 2012) xiii + 375 pp.
Reviewed by **Robert Barsky** on 2013-10-15.

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This polemical and inspired work makes an important contribution to a number of academic fields, notably literature and law, Romanticism, and the philosophical study of aesthetics, justice, and the idea of beauty. Particularly in the early sections of the book, Canuel assumes a feisty and provocative posture, challenging work in literary and cultural studies by theorists such as Michael Sandel, Lynn Hunt, Martha Nussbaum, Iris Marion Young, and Judith Halberstam, and also dissecting more recent writings by Peter de Bolla, Denis Donoghue, Umberto Eco, Elaine Scarry and Wendy Steiner. Seeking a "reparative perspective on justice," Canuel questions what kind of work aesthetics does when it is perceived as "a politically relevant experience"; by contrast, Canuel suggests that aesthetics works only "because it conveys a sense that disagreement and dissent can be committed to, and bound by, a larger organization of relations" (6). At the heart of the argument, then, "is not the role of aesthetics in political theory or political criticism but the tendency to view the political work of aesthetics solely in terms of picturing modes of being for the sake of replication" (6-7). In constructing his argument this way, Canuel enhances our understanding of the (frightening) tendency to favor homogeneity and predictability so that the corporate comes to be favored over the local, the replicated over the original, and the pre-ordained over the creative. And in the realms explored by this book, "the political aesthetic logic of beauty does not facilitate literary and political theorizing; it controls and limits it" (7).

My favorite parts of this short book are those that explain how a normative conception of beauty dating back to the eighteenth century can still be used to evaluate existing cultural or social paradigms, or as a means to discover better ones. These "normative" conceptions imply that "states of body and mind are attached not only to prescriptions but also to an implied social value of those states" (7). Passionately invoking as a corrective the disruptive and potentially revolutionary idea of the sublime, Canuel offers valuable readings of literary works, especially from the Romantic tradition, and of course from the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.

According to Canuel, saluting beauty for its symmetry and its pleasurable effects upon us is like seeking out "replicable and imitable models for human thought and action," even when the models come from "outsider" realms such as Queer or cosmopolitan theory. Refreshingly challenging this replicative approach to beauty, which may at first seem politically viable and even politically correct, Canuel finds it retrograde and homogenizing, particularly when measured against the creative and renewing forces of the sublime, which overturns expectations and creates new creative spaces.

For example, Canuel argues, the Queer theorists Eve Sedgwick and Michael Warner "attempt to build general political positions from particular experiences," and the cosmopolitan theory inspired by Amartya Sen and Kwame Anthony Appiah "infers particular experience from general principles and relationships." Hence Canuel concludes: "[T]hey address problems of social justice by proposing a normative formation for individual political subjects; it is no coincidence that the political-aesthetic commitments of these works are conveyed by making literary characters, or the turns of literary narrative, available for mimetic replication at the level of individual queer or cosmopolitan subjects." (9). Possible forms of action, Canuel writes, are thus straitjacketed by pre-existing standards. In the work of Scarry, he contends, self-interest is exchanged for social interest, "an interest in extending the beauty of populations through biological reproduction and in extending the life of beautiful objects by ensuring their preservation for future beautiful people" (19). Can we equate justice with beauty because "fair" can mean either "beautiful" or "even-handed" to both parties in a transaction? As regards justice, this also comes to imply some kind of equivalence between what is "beautiful" and what is "just." To illustrate the consequences of such a juxtaposition, Canuel invokes the idea of "fairness," linking an attribute of beauty (deemed conventional) to the idea of equality, contractualism, or mutuality under the law. Although we might ask what how this semantic coincidence works in other languages (such as with the French word "juste"), he nonetheless gets his point across.

To correct what he sees as the homogenizing tendency of an aesthetics based on beauty, Canuel invokes the sublime, which threatens by its excess the "more placid (and beautiful) form of social life" (31). Remarkably, Canuel argues that recent work on the Vietnam war, on politicization, and on activism within and beyond the academy rejects or ignores the potential value of the sublime in favor of "a symbiotic relationship with multinational corporate enterprises, whose sustaining influence shapes the arena for moral, political and aesthetic argument" (34). By means of this fascinating insight, this book challenges ever-rising levels of homogeneity in all facets of life, even or especially in higher education, where it should be unforgivable; in various ways, Canuel insists, even would-be avant-garde theorists endorse intellectual homogeneity, and in so doing bow to corporate power. Furthermore, he notes, "corporate power is not visible merely as brute force, but rather as

a subtle restructuring of dependencies resulting in a rearticulated institutional landscape with muted opportunities, incentives, and rationales for protest" (34).

To bolster his argument, Canuel cites Byron's *Manfred* and his own opposition to the death penalty for Luddites; Coleridge's Conversation Poems, in which familiarity is taken "as an occasion for insistent estrangement and strangers as an occasion for increasing obligation" (65); and Charlotte Smith's 1807 poem "Beachy Head," which he links to such contemporary issues as biopolitics. As exemplified by these poems, he argues, the sublime provides "a more conflictual mode of configuring the relations between persons; it provides an aesthetic vantage point that highlights complaint, dissent, and disagreement in the midst of a larger scheme of social cooperation" (97).

In his concluding chapter on aesthetics and animal theory, Canuel sheds further light on the relationship between the aesthetic and the sublime. But while he admirably challenges the homogenizing thrust of aesthetic theories shaped to promote social justice, and while he defends his own alternative with examples drawn from literary and philosophical texts, his debates with Academics are overlong and sometimes blunt the point of his critique. Overall, though, articulated by a careful, sensitive, and provocative writer, this critique is refreshing and valuable. When theorists inadvertently imitate corporations that seek to emulate and then infinitely reproduce the same "beautiful" or successful things, this book argues, the power of the sublime is relegated to the obscure, the dangerous, or the out-of-control.

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