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doing the work, or the pitfalls of intellectual heroes

Perhaps no figure in the history of the British new left has been more commonly heroized than Stuart Hall. The numerous reflections on his life and work, many of them offered by friends, former students and close professional colleagues speak warmly of his unique bearing and presence, describing the measure and inspirational vibrancy of his energy. David Scott's recent book *Stuart Hall's Voice* is no exception. However, rather than reminiscing about the formative experiences of shared working conditions, or the imparting of sage maxims—both tropes that many Hall tributes rely on—Scott departs almost entirely from the familiar habit of personal anecdote. Instead, he addresses Hall directly, creating an imagined dialogue between the author and his subject through a set of four letters to the memory of a departed friend. Taking the rubric of style as their focus, these epistles use Hall's example to explore several freighted questions: How ought one conduct oneself as an intellectual? What might be said to be the constitutive elements of an intellectual style? And what is at stake in answering the former, or in discerning and mastering the latter?

To answer these questions, Scott re-describes Hall's style in ethical and ontological terms, cohering his analysis in a nest of concepts like *receptivity,* and *generosity* on the one hand, and *presence, attunement,* and *proximity* on the other. The master term sitting above this wider conceptual constellation is a redoubled notion of *voice*—taken in both the literary critical sense as the characteristic manner of linguistic expression that is specific to a particular individual or their work, and in a phenomenal sense as the sonorous notes of embodied speech. In the process, Scott enacts an extended dialogue about the proper meaning and conduct of the intellectual life. With

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Hall as his model, he advances an argument for a mode of intellectual praxis that cultivates what he calls a *listening self.*

The hallmarks of Hall's style are well-known: his refusal to make a virtue of proprietary authorship by never publishing a traditional academic monograph, or single-authored book, preferring instead to work in the timely genre of the essay and on collaborative writing projects, his disinterest in standard forms of professionalism never finishing his PhD at Oxford, nor holding a traditional academic professorship until moving to the decidedly non-traditional Open University in 1979. Similarly, he is said to have eschewed labels like "theorist" or "academic," favoring the term "intellectual" in the classical French sense, or near on after that, the decidedly unlofty "teacher," as descriptors for the purpose and character of his labors. *Stuart Hall's Voice* rehearses many of these familiar biographical details.

However, Scott's tribute is also animated by an experimental impulse that is itself the result of an ongoing engagement with questions of temporality and dialogue, the construction of intellectual tradition, and the practice of criticism across generations. These concerns are taken up explicitly in "The Temporality of Generations: Dialogue, Tradition, Criticism" (2014) where he argued that criticism ought to be constructed as a mode of inter-generational dialogue in and *across* time. This dialogue then, might enable exchanges across relative experiences of co-temporality between generations allowing a given intellectual tradition to "speaks and listens to itself." The journal *small axe,* which Scott founded in 1997 and continues to edit, carries on this commitment to imagining new forms of discourse across the historical striations of Caribbean literary and intellectual traditions, and Scott first sketched the project that would become *Stuart Hall's Voice* when *small axe* published a poignant letter to the then recently deceased Hall, entitled "The Last Conjuncture."

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In *Stuart Hall's Voice* this impulse informs the epistolary structure, and the book's four letters extend Scott's dialogical project. Scott's first letter calls upon critiques of "oracular modernity" from scholars like Adriana Cavarero to highlight the importance of orality and aurality to Hall's embodied practices of thinking. The privileging of sight, and thus of the written word over the spoken word, Scott argues, has led to a conception of thinking as an individualized, decontextualized, and penetrating activity. Whereas, shifting our frame of perception to the oral/aural dimensions of thinking-as-speaking, and thus also as listening, reveals the social and relational aspect of thought as an activity—not merely as the process of cognition—but as a process of dialogue between *listening* beings. Invoking Heidegger's notion of hearkening, Scott suggests that listening and understanding be viewed as co-constitutive elements of being. That is, of a listening self which entails a heedfully receptive disposition and attuned presence.

The second and third letters further excavate this ethos of style in Hall's work by examining two conceptual leitmotifs of his thinking: contingency and identity. In the process, we are treated to readings of several of Hall's most well-known interventions as Scott re-visits seminal pieces such as "A Sense of Classlessness," "The Great Moving Right Show," and "Marxism Without Guarantees," but also less widely cited statements like the 1986 lecture titled, "Minimal Selves" which Hall offered as a post-colonial rejoinder to certain debates circulating in postmodernism about the dislocations of identity. The fourth and final letter presents the most systematized argument, and contains the most of Scott's own intellectual proclivities including meditations on the "ethics of tragedy," and a lengthy excursus on the moral philosophy of Alasdair McIntyre. As such, it forms the culminating piece of the book as a whole, tying together its many threads of suggestive observations and insight into a set of coherent claims.

Scott's clearest target is the intellectual ethos of what he terms the *critical self.* For Scott, the critical self is an unreceptive mode of dialogic engagement. In contrast to the listening self, its aim

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is to assert the priority of its own position, incorporating, accommodating or refuting the perspective and speech of the other to its own worldview. Thus, whereas the listening self entails a commitment to dialogue as a kind of thinking-in-common, for Scott, the critical self requires enacting a dialogical engagement more reminiscent of Carl Schmitt, one that posits intellectual exchange as necessarily premised upon enmity, and where the interlocutor only ever figures as adversary. The drive of the critical self's is a competitive imperative to "think better" than one another as opponents in a contest over philosophical truth or abstract principle. By contrast, the ethos and style of a listening self derived from Hall's example, is driven by an imperative to "act better as intellectual friends"—or one might hazard, as comrades—co-located within the same historical conjuncture and confronting a contingent set of political choices.

For Scott, the operations of the critical self are repressive in that they entail a denial of the "unacknowledged labor of presence" necessitated by each participant in order to enact a mutually receptive dialogue. The critical self is figured most clearly by Derrida, the arch-deconstructionist, who deployed strategies of deflection, exposure and subversion to penetrate and undermine established perspectives, but that necessarily relied upon an "inattentiveness" to dialogical gestures of his theoretical opponents. Of course, it is not quite as clear how one might form reciprocal understandings about a course of political action without also having recourse to some matter of truth, at least in a mitigated or highly qualified sense, and even less so without recourse to questions of abstract principle (i.e. in/justice, oppression, sovereignty, equality, or liberation). Likewise, although Scott's reading of Hall's style as the embodiment of a listening self is quite compelling on the whole, its construal as fundamentally non-critical is less convincing. For example, Hall's quintessential interventions like "Marxism Without Guarantees" or "The Great Moving Right Show" utilize hermeneutic strategies of critique that are precisely designed to undermine certain accepted tendencies of thought, and deflect or deconstruct predominate

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notions of political sense and reality. Furthermore, both achieve their aims superbly without necessarily displaying the kind of dialogical reciprocity that Scott wants to read as the essence of Hall's thinking.

As Scott would have it, Hall's example refuses the model of the critical self because as a mode of intellectualism it denies the reciprocity that is constitutive of listening—or at least, it denies a reciprocity of anything other than what might be described as the assumption of mutual suspicion. In this sense, Scott's charges against the critical self sit alongside other prominent critiques of suspicious intellectual postures, especially within literary studies, such as the arguments against so-called "symptomatic reading," from Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, or Rita Felski's case against the hermeneutics of suspicion in *the limits of critique* (2015). However, unlike these figures Scott seems less interested in locating a new avenue by which to revitalize the critical enterprise, so much as he is searching for a language to describe a way of being that cherishes a responsiveness to difference through dialogue, and offers a hermeneutics of listening as the basis for a renewed intellectual ethics.

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As critics then, how should we enjoin our own dialogue with Scott's text in order to, as he would have us, *listen* attentively to its suggestions and provocations as thought? One solution is to use Scott's fictive conversation as the basis for our own heroic projections of Hall as an aspirational model. Indeed, the book's tenor and tone seem to prompt this kind of engagement, asking that we take Scott's letters as both a testimonial witness to Hall's life, and as the foundations of a new intellectual credo. The potential pitfalls of adopting this sort of stance to the text, and to Hall himself, are obvious. For one thing, it involves transforming Hall's life, with all of its unfolding

uncertainty into a kind of static object lesson. Careful attention to Hall's biography, or that of any individual given close enough scrutiny, usually reveals anything but ironclad consistency in any aspect, let alone social comportment. By fixing Hall's ethos of style in the ways that analysis necessarily demands, Scott's treatment tends, unintentionally I think, to give the impression of Hall's mode of intellectualism as being *sui generis.* For instance, there is little effort to account for the force of cultural institutions like Oxford that surrounded and impinged upon, but also informed and enlivened, Hall's ethos of style or to situate him within the deeply contradictory history of Anglophone intellectualism more broadly.

For the most part, the careful sophistication of Scott's memorialization manages to avoid simply being a paean to personal example. Nevertheless, its fixation on the presence and actions of the individual as intellectual belies the fact that we routinely reach for models that embody certain convictions or attachments that we hope to invest in our own labors. In these circumstances the temptation to imbue these working models with a kind of heroic significance can prove irresistible. This temptation is exacerbated by what Kathi Weeks has noted as the increasing generalization of ideological forces within heteropatriarchal capitalism that produce the cultural mandate that we all "love our work." These appeals, relying as they do on the language of romance, and bourgeois ideals of happiness and self-determination operate with particularly insidious impunity within intellectualized spheres of labor like academe. No doubt, intellectual heroizing is one of the chief ways that workers in the university instantiate the mandate to love their work; disguising an economic imperative as a personal aspiration. As intellectuals, confronting this temptation might ultimately mean admitting our own feeling-ness as thinking creatures, recognizing that the life of the mind no less than any other aspect of material social life, depends in important ways upon affective attachments and emotional resonances. Or, perhaps even more portentously, that any mode of intellectual praxis seriously aiming to overturn the individuated and individualizing

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thought relations of 21st century capitalism would not only depend on cultivating such affective and emotional dimensions, it would demand them.

Stuart Hall's Voice is, as much as anything else, a recognition of this demand for a fuller accounting of the embodied and feeling dimensions of intellectual life. In this sense, Scott's book is offered as meditation on the capacity to view style as a serious and consequential dimension of human conduct. Grasping the importance of style in this capacity, Scott wants to argue, might enable more politically effective experiences of difference, and could be marshalled in service of more genuine instances of recognition and exchange between and across intellectual traditions, especially between the Western philosophical tradition and those of its historical outsides.

In the letters there is a slide between on the one hand Scott's tendency to consider Hall's "style of thought" á la Karl Mannheim, as a particular way of seeing the world (Hall's characteristic mode of apprehension and description as a *thinker*), and on the other his efforts to re-articulate a notion of style through the figurations of voice, (a way of being-in-the-world as an *intellectual*) providing the grounds for both the ethos, and the ethics, of a life. The result is not a coherent theory of intellectualism per se, nor certainly, is it any traditionally recognizable form of intellectual history. As a mode of inquiry, it is self-reflective and self-conscious in ways that make it startlingly alive to its object, displaying a kind of sensitivity and vulnerability but also a perceptive vision and genuine insight rarely accomplished by more conventional writing. Its ambition is to create a novel space of discourse, one located on the edge of theory and praxis; between personal memoir and historical case study. For Scott, the ostensible content of Hall's thought cannot be separated from his style in having it. Likewise, the dialogical form that Scott's book effects in order to realize his own undertaking might be understood as the morphological consequence of apprehending "the intellectual life" as both an object of inquiry, in philosophy and theory, and as a living pursuit, in ethics and politics.

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Whether Scott succeeds fully in this aim is an open question. Scott himself would likely deny pretensions to such grand ambitions—as the disavowals of analytical privilege in his epilogue make clear. However, it is hard to take Scott at his word here. The book offers quite a number of striking and provocative arguments, not only about Stuart Hall, but about the ethical dimensions of thought as a social activity more generally. Even still, for all that the book does remain mainly at the level of suggestion and provocation in its register, averring from offering any firm pronouncements or definitive conclusions about the myriad topics which glide beneath its gaze. With such an unconventional and personal text, perhaps the question of critical ambitions is misguided, or at least of the second order. In truth, the aspects of Scott's reflections on Hall that prove most instructive are those that give expression to something motivating all four letters: the matter of labor.

As with his explicit examination of voice, the tacit development of labor at work in Scott's text coheres as the result of a conceptual redoubling. It seizes upon both the embodied concerns of Scott's approach to style through voice and presence (the *labor* of a listening self), as well as the application of Hall's working life, (the relations and conditions of his intellectual *labor*), in service to the active relations of his social engagements: in academic institutions, political organizations, or interpersonal relationships. In this sense, we might read the question of intellectual labor back into Scott's formulation of intellectual style. Style becomes not a matter of mere passion, talent, or genius. Rather, it is first and foremost a matter of the approach one takes to the process of intellectual labor; of how one goes about doing their work. The qualities that Scott identifies in Hall recommend the laboring dimension of his thought, and challenge us to take seriously the philosophical and political choices, and opportunities, facing us in our intellectual works, and workings.

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Hall, for his own part, drew a sharp distinction between "academic work" and "intellectual work" as separate but conjoined fronts of cultural struggle. In his well-known lecture from 1990 on "Cultural studies and its Theoretical Legacies" Hall warns that the former poses some "very real dangers" while insisting that the latter is of "deadly serious" import. As such, intellectual credos of cultural studies which take Hall as their progenitor often present themselves as lessons in labor: addressing the political dilemmas of intellectual practice, and offering dictums about *doing the work* of cultural studies—i.e. constructing an 'organic' mode of intellectual struggle in service to historic movements for change.

In "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" from *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon discusses what he sees as the traditional failings of the "national middle-class" in decolonizing countries: laziness of thought, poverty of spirit, and cowardice in the face of political struggle. All too often, Fanon recounts, these shortcomings result in middle-class complicity with bourgeois attitudes and colonial institutions, in a bid to retain their precarious margin of class-privilege. To avoid this fate Fanon urges the educated ranks of the middle-class to realize their own "heroic path" by marshalling the intellectual and cultural capital that it has gleaned from the privileges of the colonial past, and reinvesting them in the body of the nation by empowering the people. Aside from his being a regular touchstone for both Hall and Scott, Fanon's comments here are interesting for two reasons. First, for the way that his historical analysis of the middle-classes casts political aspirations for national sovereignty in terms of the *heroic mission of intellectuals*. And second, because he construes the substance of this heroism as *deeds in struggle*. This emphasis on the deed is what distinguishes the hero from the idol, as a model for action rather than simply an object of devotion. As a view of intellectuals, it also directs our attention to the labor of thinking as popular resource in service to a larger revolutionary project.

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The apprehension of intellectual labor as deeds in struggle is surely an aspirational view, rather than an inevitable one. Nonetheless, this aspiration to the deed is, properly speaking, what constitutes the heroic. In matters of the intellect it can help foreground working models of thinking as a way of being-in-the-world with others. In Hall's case, the stylistics of his intellectual labors offer much we might aspire to. However, if it is futile to attempt to live strictly by his example, then it is also misguided to overinvest his life and its labors with legendary historical significance. Still we might learn, as Scott's letters seem to suggest, from striving to think *with* and *within* the intellectual ethos and style that he embodied. If by taking such an approach we avoid some of the pitfalls of intellectual heroizing, then following Scott we might still, and perhaps more appropriately, write letters to his memory.

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