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POETS
Politics and the Personal
On Tom Savage’s *Housing, Preservation, and Development*

I’ve been thinking a lot about poet Tom Savage’s book of poems, *Housing, Preservation, and Development*, published in 1988 by the Cheap Review Press, and the relation between politics and the personal. I was eighteen at the time of its release. I remember, during the eighties, listening to the Smiths on my brother’s turntable in the basement of my parents’ house in New Jersey, hanging out with friends at the Limelight in New York when the “club kids” dominated the scene, buying records at Bleeker Bobs and Things from England, drinking too much out of high school and writing poems while finding a second home at night on the streets of New York’s East Village. I remember the Tomkins Square Riots, the AIDS scare, Kenneth Koch’s flamboyant and sometimes witty pontifications, the crack epidemic, the Wall Street crash. Savage’s book reads like a report from the front lines.

The poem, “Mayan Update in the Eighties!,” is his indictment of America’s imperialist tendencies in the eighties which he relates to the primitive and violent character of the Mayans. He writes, “Before it was a one-sided conversation / with rocks and dirt … Ancient ball games pitted captives / against one another
for their lives. Heads of the losers were the balls … Blood was the mortar of life.” In the eighties there was the Nicaraguan revolution, various terrorist attacks in Beirut, India, and Rome, the invasion of Grenada, the Iran-Iraq war, the hostage crisis, Tiananmen Square protests, Ronald Reagan then Bush, etc. And today, Michael Brown is shot in the street and as a result racial tensions explode in urban communities, the occupy movements spread across the country calling for an end to corporate greed and government lies, unemployment continues to devastate individual lives and families despite the creation of a “millions of jobs,” and more than ever there is no hope our government will help the people who pay heavily for its excesses. Savage continues, “Before going to war, for example, / the king punctured his penis / with a stingray spine while the queen / drew a thorn-barbed rope through her tongue … The name for one king was shield.” Just think of the abuses of the military and of the recklessness of our government’s involvement in other parts of the world. “Same as it ever was,” the song says. In “Unfit to Print” Savage writes of witnessing “three young guys standing / Over a young black boy.” “Someone’s been shot, ‘I heard a Pakistani say.” Savage writes, “On the Evening News the incident got 15 seconds / After a five minute story on an ex-cop in Queens.” Savage concludes, “Not interesting at all. / No capital gains or losses involved. / Not even a powerful union.” Today such an incident becomes major news. Videos concerning the Brown shooting went viral on the internet flooding YouTube channels and sparking controversy and violence in the streets.

Savage remains critical about but open to the possibility of love, of real communication and affection. In “The St. Mark’s Baths” he writes of men who are, “Not too old / to be repulsive; not too young / to be conceited” who “know the simple pain of rejection, fear want, know that to be cruel is / to bring cruelty one’s way.” A Buddhist living on the lower east side, Savage is critical of the ego and a what he sees as conditioned behaviors that block real understanding and communication. His list of what he bluntly calls “Stupid Ideas” include “pumping iron will make me beautiful,” “women are inherently better than men” or
“men are inherently better than women,” and “God’s Country.” But at least with these men, who know what cruelty is and the loneliness that comes with age, “some fucking is possible,” and some might even be open “to conversation.” He echoes the Billie Holiday classic in the title of another poem, “Strange Fruit,” whose lyrics, in part, read,

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees

In the context of Savage’s poem, the lyrics remind this reader of the many violent acts over recent years, often fatal, against homosexuals and lesbians. Just one example: on May 15, 1988 Tommy Lee Trimble and John Lloyd Griffin were harassed for being gay and later shot by Richard Lee Bednarski in Dallas, Texas. Bednarski was convicted of the two murders, but the judge who issued the sentence gave Bednarski only thirty years rather than life. The judge, Jack Hampton, said that he believed these homosexuals would not have been killed if they “hadn’t been cruising the streets” for men. In an article for the New York Times published on January 21, 1986, Richard Meislin writes, “Public fear over the spread of AIDS has led to increased discrimination and violence against homosexuals, even as it has created new obstacles to obtaining legal protections, according both to leaders of homosexual groups and to government officials.” Savage begins the poem with a question, “Is sex worth dying for?” When I think of how present in the media the “AIDS Scare” was in the eighties and the almost absolute silence on the subject these days, despite the relatively new phenomenon of “bugchasing” and the fact that men and women are still dying, I think of this poem and also of Derek Jarman’s last film, Blue, a personal account of his own battle with AIDS released just four

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1 “Bugchasing” is a slang term for the practice of pursuing sex with HIV infected individuals in order to contract HIV.
months before his death. Savage writes that the above question is the one that Dan Rather or his “New York relatives / Start talking about” when they consider the “innocent” victims of AIDS. But, he writes, “my three friends who died after many trips / to the St. Marks Baths were just exercising / Their superconstitutional rights” when they “picked up the disease / That may be some germ warfare originally meant for ‘Nam.” America’s moral system places a high price tag on innocence and sexual purity and paints the homosexual as inherently guilty of what amounts to a criminal act because after all who in their right mind would want to risk dying for sex. But, of course, “no governmental body is going to fund the cure / Until it spreads beyond the community of Biblical ‘guilt’ / into the genitals of children” who are, of course, always “considered innocent / Even when they’re manipulative, little brats.” I find Savage’s intelligent and observant remarks on the matter a tonic even today, when sexual orientation is as much a cause for scandal and violence as it has ever been.

Affordable housing is as much a problem today as it was in the eighties hence the title of Savage’s book. Lance Freeman writes, “In 1989, 17% of renters paid more than 50% of their income for rent; in 1999, 20% did. Thus, during the period of the longest economic boom in history scarcely any progress was made in the arena of affordable housing.” My own experiences living in a semi-rent-controlled apartment in the early nineties and working in a bookstore confirm this analysis. I was earning a little over 400 dollars a week and my rent was 800 dollars. In the title poem, Savage writes, “My landlord’s lawyer … terrifies / his tenants but can’t even force / Us to move from his collapsing / Building full of junkies and dealers.” I lived next to a coke dealer in an adjacent apartment, a heavy drinker upstairs who seemingly beat his girlfriend on a daily basis, and the sound of a booming bass caused the kitchen floor to vibrate every night for almost a year. I often thought that the landlord’s refusal to plaster a large crack on the closet ceiling or to deal with the bedbug problem that arose suddenly, were attempts to cause me to vacate my apartment so he could charge a higher rent. In an-
other poem, he writes of the plumber who is “not going / to do anything for you or to / your pipes.” I remember my toilet leaked for over six months despite frequent phone calls to the superintendent. The poem continues with Savage’s recounting of his landlord’s threats to burn the building down. In fact, there was once a fire in the apartment above mine that caused the ceiling to partially collapse onto my floor, barely missing the bed. It was during the winter. The building was evacuated, and all the tenants were hauled into a bus that was extremely cold. When the repair was done on my damaged apartment, I was told I could not move back into my former apartment as promised but had to move into a much smaller apartment one floor up because the rent for the now renovated apartment had doubled. After this, my rent increased by twenty-five dollars a year. My yearly raise on the job was twenty-five cents. I lived like that for close to ten years, figuring that soon my paycheck would not be able to pay the rent. But I spent my time, “Hunting others’ old books and stereophonic treasure.” A love of jazz and poetry held me up against the desperate reality. Savage is the one poet I know who understands this life, and, in his poems, he speaks of the problems of affordable housing and other issues regarding urban life and in doing so bridges the gap between poetry and politics. A person’s life is political. And I know many poets who have experienced similar problems.

Tom Savage is one of the sanest poets we have. Take these lines from his poem “News Release”: “Democracy and Capitalism are incompatible” or “The revolution happens in the way you treat one another; not in the sweet by-and-by” or “The youngest generation in America has no business talking about what it’s going to do for the working class, poor, and other objects of its generosity” as long as it takes pleasure in giving orders to fellow workers” or “Professionalism is a pseudo-scientific delusion based on exploitation.” In “From New York: The Spirit of the Nicaraguan Revolution” he talks of the writing life. I think it is an experience many poets share: “When everything around me or inside me / is exploding, I sit down and write this poem,” but, of course, this doesn’t “put the rain on hold,” or “keep past due
bills from coming / To me with flaming hands and, oh, sad eyes / in the mail.” But it does help “organize / all of the horrors of my life.” His psychologist refers to this as a “coping mechanism” but Savage writes, “I wouldn’t call it that” because “Mechanisms are made for the hearts of cars.”

A streetwise sensibility runs through these poems, a sensibility little valued, now, when most of the major decisions about who to study or what we should be thinking about in poetry or politics, are made from behind a desk in an institution far removed from the concerns of the real world and not drawn from “facts on the ground” as Charles Olson once put it. David-Baptiste Chirot, in an essay about Amiri Baraka’s essay, “Why American Poetry is Boring, Again” writes that for Baraka, in these times, “a poetry of ‘the outdoors,’” of the actual, is being eschewed. Instead there is a desire for belonging, safety, all the comforts of Homeland Security.” Two years ago, when I was filming, alone and with a small point-and-shoot Canon camera, homeless vets, former drug addicts, and gang members in Jersey and on the Lower East Side, despite considerable risk, I was able to document the language and face of despair and anger otherwise silenced in the media. Certain voices were also silenced due to certain trends of the past thirty years in poetry. That’s no surprise, of course, as changing fashions rule in poetics as in clothing.

The publication of Stephen Jonas’s Selected Poems in 1994 filled a significant gap in our understanding of the so-called “Boston Renaissance” of the late fifties and early sixties by bringing back into print the crucial work of this important poet. More recently, the publication of Harold Norse’s selected poems, I Am Going to Fly through Glass reprints the work of a once famous poet who should be better known today. Ammiel Alcalay has also shown, in his Lost and Found series, the chapbooks he’s been publishing for four years now, that it is important to recover the works of the past in order to better understand our present. For Alcalay, context is important and, when this is understood and activated there, is an opening up of possible perspectives and interpretations that counter the official histories of, for example,
the second-generation New York School and the individual poets at the center or on the periphery of St. Marks Church.

My copy of *Housing, Preservation, and Development* is inscribed to the poet Rose Lesniak, “A rose who has no thorns.” Anyone remember her? or Barbara Barg? or Susan Cataldo, or Michael Scholnick or Tom Weigel or Rene Ricard? And if so, ask yourself how well known is their work these days among the younger poets. And what about Tom Savage? He should be better known, but discussions of poetry move hesitantly around politics and have their special agendas with regard to certain movements and poets, with academics, furthermore, often framing arguments from a privileged perspective and not from the level of the street. For Amiri Baraka this is “playing it safe,” “not ‘saying something,’” in order “to protect one’s career,” for example. The danger, he writes, is that this “creates a pervasive dullness, an entropy of the speeds of poetries involved with an actual which includes war, being of it or opposed to it.”

These poets knew and studied with Ted Berrigan and were visible once as part of the second New York School that gathered around the Poetry Project at St. Marks. Perhaps they are lesser known now because they wrote during a time when there were no real publishing venues for “experimental poetry” and no media outlets like Facebook for self-advertisement. There was Public Access Poetry, a program that aired during the late seventies and featured many of these poets reading. But it aired on a small cable station, and it didn’t reach a large number of the intended audience. Pennsound has uploaded the crucial series on its website. There is a poem by Lewis Warsh called “Scenes from the Road” in Harris Schiff’s xeroxed, hand-stapled magazine from the early seventies, “The Harris Review,” that addresses the various roads taken or not taken by poets “on the scene,” facts which might have contributed to their being lesser known:

Some fade off the scene for indefinite periods of time, others stay on it forever… Some live in apartments, others buy or rent houses & farms in the country… Some take good care
of themselves while others lie in bed worrying about their health… Some edit magazines. Some drift off & get into other things… Others just leave it all behind, while still others remain blinded by it all. Almost everyone comes through.

But to think that the poets who fall outside the map of current scholarship, which is often dictated by what books get promoted and reviewed in what magazines or on what websites and the prevailing discourse that absorbs them, is somehow “second rate” is inaccurate and misses the point entirely. Ted Berrigan, writes poet Joel Lewis, “would never put down other poets. … Even poets that we considered, in our hyper-critical youth-o-scope, to be square and beyond our pale, Ted would firmly insist: ‘Hey, he’s a real poet.’” The process of inclusion and canonization today is revealed, for example, in each new Norton Anthology. The net reaches as far as it can go and other anthologies reach still farther and are more inclusive than Norton and perhaps more accurate in their attempts to encompass the various poetry movements as they attempt to establish a coherent history up to the present, but they don’t, nor can they, reach far enough. It is always a provisional selection. As Alan Davies once put it, “Anthologies are to poets what zoos are to animals.” What is necessary now more than ever is a kind of research and development work because what makes the news is never the entire story or even, in many cases, what is most important. As Jack Spicer once put it, “There are bosses in poetry as well as in the industrial empire.” Witness the large number of presses in recent years that hold contests and charge fees, perhaps justifiably given the nature of the current economy, and yet think of what kinds of poets might be excluded from participating. It is more costly to publish books today, especially books of “experimental poetry,” and there is more risk of financial loss, due to internet sales and the status of the book in the digital age, but the greater cost that is my focus here, involves the marginalization of poets who simply can’t play by these rules, who don’t have the money or the right contacts. When a poet from the
past is “lesser known,” it is simply not economically feasible to reprint their work since there is no assurance it will sell. It is a brave move on the part of those publishers who take the chance anyway despite the dwindling sense of community these days.

Not every poet has an MFA and a position in the academy, however tenuous, and often poets in the past chose other options and travelled different paths, often diverging from the central “scene,” thus are harder to locate in the current debates surrounding poetry and politics. Savage writes, “One more / Potential collectible down the drain. Oh well, / I’ll never be a businessman, anyway.” I don’t have an MFA and am unemployed as I write this, having worked seventeen years in a bookstore that closed unexpectedly. I lost my apartment when the unemployment ran out and relied on friends to help me get back on my feet. Yet what unemployed poet hasn’t had the experience that Savage writes about: “Every time I intend to spend a full day looking for work / I end up writing a poem instead.” And as for his resume Savage tells himself, “You should forget all that stuff about / six years doing nothing but writing / and four years in India!” I am not affiliated with any institution of higher learning, yet I know of poets doing work of real importance in the academy on the level of teaching practices and engagement with students. I don’t believe there was an ideal time for poetry in the remote or recent past, whether that was the sixties, seventies, or eighties. My concern is with context and recuperation. As Savage writes, in “Ophthalmology Gulch,” “A fool sees only today” and

  Sloth sees only tomorrow.
  Death sees only yesterday.
  Children see only mornings.
  Adults see only minutes.
  Fame sees only an hour.
  Buddha sees only a world-cycle.

I can only second what Bernadette Mayer says in her introduction to the book: “I’ve learned a lot from the writing of Tom
Savage,” from “his constant, detailed observations of people and things, his prolific nature, his art on top of everything.” But as Savage writes in the poem, “Hermitage”:

I met a Burmese monk this morning
over my coffee and breakfast special.
He wants to convert Avenue B.
But there was no one there
and nothing special
about being alone
in the city.

What matters most is the work to be done and that somebody does it despite the risks involved.

In his speech at the Tuli Kupferberg memorial Tom Savage, speaking of the Fugs and the group of poets and writers who call themselves the Unbearables, tells of a remark that Kupferberg made, jokingly, about himself being a “second rate poet.” Whether or not this is true, says Savage, Kupferberg displayed a modesty that is lacking in a community where he feels “many younger poets think they are geniuses.” Finally, he hopes Kupferberg’s “egolessness persists without his body.”

We must explore all types of writing, even the so-called “second rate” writing of “lesser” poets, as the official histories would have it, to establish a real “town council” approach to recuperating the past in order to understand the present in its proper context. History, as Olson once put it, remains “unrelieved.”

Works Cited