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Notes Towards a Commentary on Sean Bonney's *Letters Against the Firmament*

William Rowe, Birkbeck College, UK, w.rowe@bbk.ac.uk

Bonney takes the romantic and surrealist traditions (Hölderlin, Rimbaud, Césaire) to a point where they meet their impossibility, not by subjective diminishment but through encounter with the political as it currently exists. The inner life of the poetic subject is unprotected; this multiplies difficulties. The singular energy of Bonney's *Letters* finds itself at this conjuncture. Speed and compression of the work grapples with those same qualities as they exist inside political oppression. Poetry, for Bonney 'a specific method of thought', carries out the work of creating form as definition by means of thought thinking, dialectically, against itself. This article seeks, overall, to consider the means by which the *Letters* sustain their energy within current political conditions.



Meteoric speed and extreme spatial compaction are prime characteristics of Sean Bonney's *Letters*.¹ Speed brings thought into continuous collision with itself; compaction brings into image the condition of extreme enclosure generated by capitalism. The two intersect: the thinking of insurrection enters into contradiction with its other side, with the apparatuses of repression that close down possibilities of resistance, in terms both of material space and of subjective force. The movement of this contradiction is the most vital nerve of the *Letters*. Bonney wrote of Anna Mendelssohn that poetry for her is 'a specific method of thought.'² This is true also of his own work, where thought is driven to think against itself; the forces that drive it are internal and external. Within the possibilities of commentary, the *Letters* exceed what can be said about the work they do, since they lay bare a limit where thought is insufficient to the change that the historical moment requires. Commentary can only point to the ways in which the work apprehends that limit.

I will be arguing that the *Letters* offer no stopping-place for thought, no ideas in which one could find release from the dire need for change and its continued impossibility, and that they express instead a feeling of restless agitation, a continuous anxiety which is so insistent that it constitutes a kind of faithfulness which perhaps only poetry can sustain. Said differently, the *Letters* express what was necessary at the time of the student movement, the riots and their sequelae. Why do the *Letters* still feel necessary? Perhaps it can be said that they keep faith with the emotions of that time by going up to and beyond the limits of gestures of resistance.

A main part of Bonney's method is to make himself vulnerable, so as to receive inside himself the repressive forces unleashed after the suppression of the Tottenham riots and the defeat of the student movement of 2010–2011. The voice does not want to give itself the protective shield of right judgment. It takes up the method of dialectics as proposed by Theodor Adorno, where thought wants 'to blast open the insoluble' by incorporating the un-thought into itself, through 'the power of negation.'³ The *Letters* seek to sustain that openness to the outside in their form; they abandon the poetic line, and the insubordination to order that it can offer. Bonney turns that situation inside out: he chooses the terrain of the enemy: 'prose, instrument of the state.'⁴ At the extreme, 'I felt I had become a tiny fissure in the decay chain set off by George Osborne's voice. One among countless disinterested scalpels, hanging there, in the grains of his voice. And those scalpels are us.'⁵ To recognise where that voice and the chain of degraded meaning inside it places the 'I', and at the same time to go from recognition to understanding the operation which that voice is carrying out, produces a point where the will to resistance meets an impossibility. The poetry of the *Letters* exists at that point. The figure of wounding immediately turns into enforced self-wounding:

there's no time for self-protection. The operation of the wound overcomes automatic responses of defending oneself. No idea or image comes forward to mediate pain.

Part of the vulnerability that Bonney chooses to live inside consists of refusing representations of suffering of the kind that seek to accumulate moral capital, including positive self-regard. This is linked to a wider aspect of his stance: that the work is antithetical to the tendency of much Leftist thinking to combine moralising declarations with an empiricist approach to reality, an attitude whose confidence in realist representations fails to recognise that reality has become its own ideology.

The first pages of the book pass through a series of stances that promise the possibility of resistance, each one of which reaches a limit. The 'Letter on Riots and Doubt,' which is the first of the letters, enters the thought that 'the riot form' might answer the 'need of a new prosody,' at which point the subject says to the other, 'but [...] you are right to worry that I'm making a fetish of the riot form.' (8) But then Bonney writes: '[T]here haven't been any damn riots. Seriously, if we're not setting fire to cars we're nowhere.' The letter is dated August 5th 2011, one day before the riots began: Bonney's political antennae are acute. The letter anticipates an extreme compression: 'The city gets hotter and deeper as the pressure soars. Electrons get squeezed out of atoms to produce a substance never seen on Earth. [...] The metallic sea of hydrogen is thousands of miles deep.' (8–9) The will to revolt meets its impasse: here, exactly at a point of impossibility, poetic making occurs.

'The metallic sea of hydrogen is thousands of miles deep.' To read this as a hyperbolic metaphor and nothing more, is to allow bourgeois repression (the insurrection never happened) to have accomplished its own shunting into the imaginary. The image belongs to the thinking in Bonney's essay on Auguste Blanqui's *Eternity by the Stars*, which was written immediately after the defeat of the Paris Commune: Bonney calls it 'a poetic text by default.'⁶ He writes, 'the enormity of Blanqui's imaginary system' in which all events are condemned to repeat eternally, 'is the enormity of the achievement of the Commune as well as the enormity of the horror of its defeat. In Blanqui's system, the Communards do not die, but dissolve into a metaphoric squall, a revolutionary poetics.' In turn, the ruling class's attempt to destroy by a 'near-insane gravity' what it cannot eternally suppress produces the logic of that 'metallic sea of hydrogen.' Here is Bonney's fuller account of his stance:

In moments of defeat, revolution tumbles back into poetics, just as in moments of insurrection—as Rimbaud, as the Surrealists and as the Situationists knew—the energies concealed in poetics explode outwards into revolution. Revolution doesn't become poetic, poetry shatters itself in the process of becoming revolutionary.

The Blanqui essay's thinking takes a further turn in the 'Letter on Silence'. First there's the surrealist image, defined by Aimé Césaire 'as a "means of reaching the infinite."' (12) But that image, exemplified for Césaire by Lautréamont, has its limits:

When, in the poem "Black People", Amiri Baraka said "The magic words are: Up against the wall mother/fucker this is a stick up" he had found the almost invisible point where George Jackson and Lautréamont become the same person, where the revolutionary tract and the esoteric poem become the same thing.⁷

The statement is from Bonney's 'Notes on Militant Poetics', which cite George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* letters, written from the San Quentin State Prison, as embodiment of what poetry needs to become.⁸ The 'Notes' quote Sergei Nechayev's *Catechism of a Revolutionist* which was reprinted by the Black Panthers in 1969: "*The revolutionist is a person doomed. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and passion for revolution.*"⁹ Bonney goes on to comment: 'Jackson is forced into a more radical position than either Rimbaud or Nechayev precisely because of the forced eradication of that passion.' The *Letters* repeatedly constitute that all-but uninhabitable point of 'forced eradication.'

The 'Letter on Silence' works out some of the consequences: Baraka's words turn the infinite of Césaire's thought 'inside out'. The outside, their consequence, becomes an itemising of the police treatment of Mark Duggan (the event that sparked the riots), as 'a small thesis on the nature of rhythm.' The letter is dated August 30th, 2011, after the riots, when carceral repression on a scale that recalls Judge Jeffrys's Bloody Assizes, had begun. The pulse of police violence offers itself as a measure for the will to resistance. The possibility that poetry at that point 'transforms itself dialectically into the voice of the crowd' is cited.

Baraka's phrase also fulfils Walter Benjamin's belief that the surrealist image needed to move beyond itself so as to carry 'the infernal machine[s]' of the great nineteenth-century anarchists into the image which can operate as an 'innervation' of the body, allowing the affective capacity for revolutionary destruction to become 'bodily collective innervation.'¹⁰ But the 'Letter on Silence' also reaches a limit: 'what if' transformation into the voice of the crowd is 'not true. What if all [poetry] can do is transform into the endless whacks of police clubs—certainly you get that in official poetry.' The 'police whacks,' with the collusion of official poetry, 'in their turn transform into the dense hideous silence we're living inside right now.' (12) The silence, the impossibility of speech—of any contrary speaking—places response to wounding at a location of impossibility. The letter refuses mediation that might diminish violation of

the body, not only mediation by art but also by ideology. By not deploying knowledge or other kinds of cultural capital the letter desists from deflecting the shocks of systemic violence. The subject, here invoked as collective, is exposed to incision by that violence; a zero degree of poetry which the *Letters* force into expression, as a fact of the senses. ‘There is no prosody, there is only a scraped wound—we live inside it like fossilised, vivisected mice.’ (13) The sense of ‘fossilised’ summons a stony insensitivity, something that can’t be reconciled with surgical cuts upon a living body; there is simply deadlock: thinking reaches a stopping-point. The letter ends with a lowering of intensity: ‘So difficult to think about poems right now. I’m out of here. Our stab-wounds are not self inflicted.’ The last phrase gives a premature and imaginary concreteness to damage received, a kind of anticipatory protection. Though its tone is throw-away, it’s also a gesture of defence, placing suffering at a distance. The change of tone marks a shift to the register of daily life, its continuance inside a measure of shielding.

As an action, Baraka’s statement names a willed violent act and because it is an act it also makes the lived violence of the social—for the Black subject in America—tangible. It brings into the senses what it moves against; in this way for Bonney it can be a model of the poem which creates no walls between itself and the outside. But that could not be accomplished by mimesis of the social at the level of appearances: in the tradition of Blake, Marx and Rimbaud the energy of the *Letters* gathers itself in the will to penetrate behind appearances to the real operations of the capitalist system. Bonney writes in ‘Notes on Militant Poetics’:

The Situationists called poetry the “anti-matter of consumer society”, a fairly questionable claim, but one that is at least expressive of the chasm that operates between official reality’s definitions of poetry and those of whatever still remains of the revolutionary avant-garde. ‘Mainstream’ poetry is irrelevant: the Situs knew the real poetry of capital was advertising. Advertising, the corporate avant-garde, is the anti-matter of everyday life. Poetry, meanwhile, has become entirely invisible—or rather, it only exists in weird states of high and necessary intensity, in zones of absolute negation. And so it would stay, if it were not true that advertising is itself becoming fluent in what was always poetry’s esoteric specialty, ie the language of the dead.¹¹

That the place of absolute negation has been co-opted and invaded by capitalism itself, is the difficulty that the *Letters* start from and return to in various ways. The subject puts itself in the hardest possible place; this potentiates thought. But that place is also where will, a necessity in politics, reaches an impasse, and here a certain divergence between the political subject and the poetic subject begins to emerge. At the same time, the two cross over into each other: when Bonney writes ‘the police recuperation of the

sun' (28) and other similar phrases in which the cosmos itself has been subsumed, the extreme negativity of the image, the way it shuts down the senses, carries the thought of what has been shut down, namely possibility.

The 'Second Letter on Harmony' is a turning point in the *Letters*. It's here that their conceptual work is at its densest. Bonney gathers together all possibilities of unmaking the dominant system into the question of whether any type of 'anti-matter' might exist. What's at stake, at the most basic level, is the method of Marxism: the exposure of counter-forces existing beneath the regime of capitalist appearances. The *Letters* elsewhere speak of mathematics as a modality of thought that might be able to do this work. Here, in the 'Second Letter on Harmony,' the work of critical abstraction goes to Lenin's notes on Hegel, written at a time of extreme adversity—comparable to the current situation of the communist/anarchist Left—when during the First World War the German Social-Democratic party capitulated to the forces of nationalism.¹²

Bonney cites the Pythagorean belief in the existence of a 'counter-earth', whose function is to hold 'the entire system of hierarchical harmony together.' (33) Thus the system of cosmology that keeps 'everybody [...] in their place' is 'an untruth.' There follow a series of turns where the text confronts thought with external political reality and forces its internal contradictions to spill out. The 'untruth' has 'the power to kill'; but it 'can transgress its own limits until something quite different, namely, crime, or impossibility appears. For Ernst Bloch, the revolution was the crossroads where the dead come to meet.' But, once again, Bonney breaks open thought to what is outside it, to what it leaves out, to the point where the substrate of knowledge on which it rests has become false: 'But our system of harmony knows so well it contains its own negation that it has mummified it, and while we know we live within a criminal harmony, we also know we are held helplessly within it as fixed subjects, or rather as objects, even cadavers, of an alien music.' Here the Blanqui essay, where Bonney quotes Blanqui's 'How many icy cadavers are crawling like this in the height of space,' has made its way into the letter. Conceptual thought and poetic thought, 'poetic labour' and conceptual labour, turn into each other as they reach their respective limits, limits where each can no longer repel what it excludes.¹³

At the point where the potentiality of destruction seems to have been totally shut down by complete subsumption of any possible manifestation of it, precisely there, the *Letters* keep moving. Adorno, in his *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, speaks of 'dialectical immanence intensified to an extreme,' where there is no moment at which thought can rely on 'complete mediation by [its] objects.'¹⁴ A singular strength of the *Letters* is the way that thinking, driven by the need for revolutionary action, thinks against itself, against its objectification inside the representations from which its concepts are

constructed. This is the form of the *Letters*' inner restlessness. What resists resistance calls forth the greatest subjective force. A limit of music and a limit of speaking conjoin: 'Speech, which would usually be your means of entry to actual lived time, is compressed and stretched into a network of circles and coils, at its perimeter a system of scraped, negative music, and at its centre a wall.' (40-41) The 'Second Letter on Harmony' cites a duration of time in which sound, heard in John Coltrane's *Live in Seattle* album, becomes 'a force that moves beyond any musical utterance, while still containing direct, clear communication at its centre.' (35) Bonney names this 'a Benjaminian monad', a reference to Benjamin's essay 'On the Concept of History,' with its notion of a force capable of blasting open the continuum of historical time.¹⁵

But the monad is not, as it has sometimes become in current thinking about history, a mere vehicle for representing what has been excluded from the historical account. In Benjamin, it is an event, one that brings dialectics to a standstill. But if dialectics at a standstill is also the other, the sun shut down, then it's the point at which the greatest energy is needed, the energy of anger transformed into holding movement and stasis, possibility and impossibility, together. It's out of that forced conjunction that sound moves against itself: 'beyond any musical utterance [...] that horn sounds like a metal bone, a place where the dead and future generations meet up and are all on blue, electric fire.' (35) The metal which had represented the reduction of hydrogen atoms to total inertia has transformed into an instrument that awakens the dead in the presence of 'future generations.' The sound Bonney instantiates is a fragment that carries potentiality: 'we, however temporarily, become the irruption into present time of the screams of the bones of history, tearing into the mind of the listener, unambiguously determining a new stance towards reality, a new ground outside of official harmony, from which to act.' (36) This potentiality breaks open present time. In the same act it brings the binding of time by the letters themselves, the relation between internal and external time in them, to an edge which is both a threshold and a stopping place. But the stopping place is charged with the highest possible energy. Everything that is contrary to the *Letters*' energy is condensed inside its momentary overcoming.

Instead of dissolving difficulty, the *Letters* concentrate it. Some further comments can now be made on the 'Letter Against Sickness,' cited above. Bonney, with the dilated pupils of someone who has not slept all night, sees a seagull tearing a pigeon apart in the middle of the road; he asks: 'I mean, if George Osborne was lying there in tatters in the middle of the road, [...] what would I do?' (104). To see oneself facing the enemy in a state where one can eat them, kill them, the real enemy, Osborne being the architect of cruelty against dispensable humans (called 'austerity'), is to move from thinking to action and to ask what one is capable of.¹⁶ But this is not simply the well-known process

of putting theory to the test of practice. A theory which could frame a question, as in an experiment, and, more fundamentally, as thought that gives definition to experience as such, is not available. There's no prehension, no subject that can delineate what might be there. 'I was sweating by this point. I was no longer even a human being, just some glowing monster of anxieties and vicious isotopes, storms and circles. Revenge. Law. Decency. I think I puked.' The integrity of the person, their integration into a continuity that could support meaning, is at an edge. The occurrence attains form in the figure of the decay of atoms into isotopes, i.e. atomic fission: 'I felt I had become a tiny fissure in the decay chain set off by George Osborne's voice,' a voice heard on the news saying 'our NHS'. (104, 103) But decay or explosion into subatomic particles is not the figuration of a subject. It's a terminal state, but one lived through. In a further image of decay of affect caused by penetration of enemy violence the 'I' has become 'one among countless disinterested scalpels, hanging there, in the grains of his voice. And those scalpels are us.' Living through this fragmented time empties the lure of assassination, and vacates that self-judgement which might offer a plane of possible self-continuance on which to endure.

In his essay 'When the poet is once in command of the spirit,' Hölderlin writes of the possibility that 'the poetic spirit' might fall into 'an empty infinity,' and 'lose its identity' when it 'break[s] up into an infinity of isolated moments' (as it were, an atomic series).¹⁷ Bonney enters that moment of decay, as a location determined by the political outside. Once again, there's a turning inside out of interior life. Here we can grasp a larger movement of the *Letters*, which had begun in *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud*, part of which is included in *Letters Against the Firmament*: they place the cancelled infinity of the romantic and surrealist traditions inside the forces of a new, more totalising political oppression. But Bonney keeps alive the infinite of the possible; he doesn't abandon it to despair, still less to the half-way despair that protects itself with sour resentment and self-vindication.

Where the collective 'us' has been shattered and reduced to mere fragments of enemy violence, the possibility of revolutionary violence reaches a limit. Deprived of faith in actions of destructive political violence, the person becomes more undefended in the face of the violence of the system. In *Happiness*, there's the line: 'when you meet a Tory in the street, cut his throat'. (136) In the 'Letter on Sickness', the cutting, the release obtained by a violent act against the enemy, has been turned back inside and against the subject. At this limit, the world of phenomena breaks up into an unknown condition, which it actually is doing, Bonney teaching us to look and not turn away.

Notes

- ¹ The *Letters* comprise the major part of *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015).
- ² Sean Bonney, “‘Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform’ – Anna Mendelssohn.’ *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 226, February-March 2011, 17–19. <https://www.poetryproject.org/media/pages/file-library/3461040332-1605470984/226-newsletter.pdf> [consulted 17th March 2021], (17).
- ³ Theodor Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* (London: Polity Press, 2008), 55, 137.
- ⁴ Juan José Saer, ‘La cuestión de la prosa’, in *La narración objeto* (Buenos Aires: Seix Barral, 1999), 57.251.
- ⁵ Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 104. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.
- ⁶ ‘Comets and Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination in Exile,’ <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/comets-barricades-insurrectionary-imagination-exile> [consulted 16.1.22] np.
- ⁷ Sean Bonney, ‘Notes on Militant Poetics,’ <https://my-blackout.com/2018/06/15/sean-bonney-notes-on-militant-poetics/> [consulted 3rd March 2021] np.
- ⁸ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: the Prison Letters of George Jackson*, available on-line at <http://historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/soledadbro.html>.
- ⁹ ‘Notes on Militant Poetics.’
- ¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, Part 1, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 214, 216.
- ¹¹ Bonney, ‘Notes on Militant Poetics’.
- ¹² Lenin, *Collected Works* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1960–1970), Vol. 17.
- ¹³ The phrase ‘poetic labour’ comes from Bonney’s Blanqui essay.
- ¹⁴ Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, 138.
- ¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁶ See Danny Hayward, *I/II* (London: Shit Valley, 2017) for the difficulty of finding ‘the real enemy’.
- ¹⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘When the poet is once in command of the spirit’, in *Essays and Letters*, ed. and transl. by Jeremy Adler and Charlie Louth (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 286.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

