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## A Conversation about Death

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This paper (taking the form of a conversation between its two authors) asks in what ways Sean Bonney's work of the 2010s might be considered an agitated historiography of death under the specific social relations presented by the UK/EU during this period. The extremism of the *Letters Against the Firmament* (2015) lies in the way they make felt fully that austerity is not a merely problematic policy but a policy that kills, i.e. explicitly-yet-often-invisibly causes death. The title of Bonney's final book-length publication *Our Death* (2019) seems to go even further in its demand for solidarity – through its use of a strange plural pronoun. In close-reading these works in their relation to death, dying, the dead, we place especial emphasis on 1) a perspective of sociological realism, discussing the communities as much as dividing lines of the distribution of death in the 2010s and how these are negotiated by Bonney; 2) the poet's romantic and melancholic streaks, leading us to suggest that *Cancer* and *Our Death* might be considered as dark love poems calling for an orgy of skeletons; 3) how Bonney's poetry formulates a leftist, dialectical theory of death torn between resistance to state murder and a no future-embrace of death: in the refusal to live while others die.

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## Joint Introduction

In 2019 the poet Sean Bonney published his book *Our Death*. In November 2019 our friend Sean Bonney died. The relationship between those two sentences is too complex for us to explain here or indeed to ourselves, and we won't try to explain it. Instead we will talk here about a more general relationship, between two contradictory left-wing approaches to death, and also about the reality of that contradiction within Sean's writing throughout the period which journalists and historians will now seal off in hermetical brackets as 'the 2010s'. We intend to talk about the reality of that contradiction *as poetry*, rather than as the working out of some pre-existing theoretical positions. We do not want to produce a left-wing 'theory' of death either. We think that what it meant to die in the last decade is also why dying is what that decade means; and this is an essay that counts the ways its dead continue to exist, in community with the living.

When we first got wind of this special issue, we had already been talking about how our sense of the political 'meaning' of death had changed. The early stages of resistance to austerity in the UK were exuberant, attacking and carnivalesque. Their signature aesthetic feature was a rhetorical inversion of state violence designed to make it point back at the personalities who condoned and legislated it. As the decade wore on, and we expended more of our lives fighting to keep our friends and comrades alive, artistic dramatisation of extreme political violence became harder and harder to sustain. One of the things we were asking ourselves was whether that commitment to staying (and to keeping one another) alive might itself be aesthetically and politically reactionary.<sup>1</sup>

But that's a question that for both of us is inseparable from our relationship to Sean's writing. Sean knew from the beginning that austerity as instituted by the Tory(-led) governments from 2010 onwards was not only a minor inconvenience, but a policy that kills. Death by austerity, state-induced murder, death by capitalism: many of these 'social murders'<sup>2</sup> that would occur throughout the decade struck as deaths at home, deaths at the workplace, deaths on the way home, deaths of homeless people largely going unnoticed, seemingly natural deaths, ordinary suicides.<sup>3</sup> These deaths are heard and spoken as murders in Sean's *Letters Against the Firmament* (Enitharmon, 2015): a series of agitated and agitating, militant, despairing and destructive, expansive letters in prose blocks that are (a challenge to) poetry. Yet, with the sequences *Cancer* and *Our Death* in Sean's final book, *Our Death* (Commune, 2019), the relationship to death becomes more ambiguous: it now seems to also form an apocalyptic vanishing point, even a community desired; there are gestures towards punk/queer attitudes of 'no future'. The way in which Sean's poetry seems torn between resistance to state

murder and a no future-embrace of death (in the refusal to live while others die) – these are equally valid, yet irreconcilable moral injunctions for a left-wing response to death.<sup>4</sup>

Our method in what follows is historical insofar as we try to look at Sean’s poetry from the 2010s as a struggle with, testament to and documentation of what it was like to die – or to not die, but observe the death of others – in the 2010s in Britain (including Europe).<sup>5</sup> For this reason, and because the chronology of the 2010s has carried a logic of its own, of ever-increasing fascist pressure, the following conversation will be structured by a movement from *The Commons* (2011) to *Letters against the Firmament* (2015) to *Our Death* (2019). It is based on an – edited, reworked, and reordered – email conversation that took place between April 2020 and April 2021, under the subject of ‘Stay-At-Home Amnesia’: as a further encapsulation of the velocity 2010–2019, the velocity of this year has itself been homicidal.

### ***The Commons* (2011)**

**Danny Hayward:** OK, so both of us think that ‘death’ is something that gets dealt with in Sean’s writing from early on: that it isn’t just some melancholic ‘turn’ that can be identified with its ‘late’ period. All of that vocabulary is such banal teleological garbage anyway: it runs counter to everything Sean thought about history; to the whole philosophy of revolutionary aesthetics that his poetry wore on its sleeve.

So maybe I can start some ‘readings’ with a couple of thoughts about the (slightly) earlier work. I think the first poetry of Sean’s I ever read was *Poisons, Their Antidotes* (2003), but the first book of his that felt to me like it opened a path towards something was *The Commons* (2011). Though I agree that it was with the early *Letters* that the work began to feel era-defining, or as if the writing had suddenly opened up not so much a path as a whole terrain, and a tradition, and a way of defining ‘the’ problem.<sup>6</sup> I’m speaking vaguely, and maybe in terms that seem too grossly to invoke the figure of the paterfamilias and his big rolling estates: one day all this will be yours blah blah blah. I don’t quite mean it like that. And I think in part what the poetry did then was name the event that we were all inside: the Tory restoration, the ‘surprise attack by a government of millionaires’: a period of sudden, jarring and brutal upheaval, etc. You don’t get that in the earlier poetry. In *The Commons* the project is much more concerned with establishing a field of correspondences than it is with naming a moment. It is in its own terms a ‘diagram of the class struggle’: the task is to establish geometries of connection between disparate figures, voices, forms, styles of musical expression, across the little picket fences of period and the contingencies of ‘geography’, whatever

that is. Although within that context there IS a frequent invocation of ‘the dead’, if not yet of our deaths or of the omnipresence of dying. A short catalogue, from a brief re-reading of Book II:

we will raise the dead [not actually from the poem: but from its blurb,<sup>7</sup> and originally a slogan of Will Rowe’s]

get up now, dead man [a semi-citation from Bruce Jackson’s collection of Texas prison work songs, *Wake Up, Dead Man*]<sup>8</sup> (14)

like our ancestors are  
like safe now  
ok, forget that  
o burnt frequency  
the dead, so brightly  
digging up the dead (25)

you have now reached  
to put into practice  
the knowledge you  
you have acquired ghosts  
in short, are ready  
work / crime / magic  
secret history number  
the properties of ideas  
put into ourselves  
sorry, local residents  
this is how you talk  
the body’s acoustics  
structurally / tearing  
your playhouse down (27)<sup>9</sup>

I think the lines from that last quotation (the last poem of the book) are the most ‘representative’. I read a couple of weeks back an obituary for Sean written by Luke Roberts, who says that more than any other poet Sean was ‘ready’ for the Thatcherite restoration of 2010, and had prepared for it;<sup>10</sup> and that remark seems to me not so much a critical observation as a recapitulation of what Sean was writing at the time: ‘you have now reached’, ‘you have acquired’: the language is explicitly the language of the

textbook or training course, the alienated vocabulary of some shitty on the job work-skills module, displaced into the half-world of phantoms and murdered traditions in which Sean's idea of anti-capitalism plays out. The half-world of ghosts: the executed criminal, the hunted witch, the persecuted marginal. Of 'the dead': whose minds can be dug up 'brightly'. Gravedigging divested of any of its conventional implications: of clandestinity, macabre self-concealment and fetish. Instead, necromancy as the only thing to do, as both political praxis and source of immediate pleasure. Which of course it *always* was for Sean, right to the end: I think about him introducing his reading of *Cancer* at the Poetry Emergency event in 2018 by talking about his discovery of Gogou as someone who had the same thoughts as him, or the same politics (I can't quite remember).<sup>11</sup> In any case, digging up the dead is not a 'perversion' but is in some ways the only way to find comrades and friends; the practice is intensely *social*, just as the writing of the poetry itself is social in that it can't be separated out from the practice of collective study and its long history in the movements of the oppressed, from the Chartists through the study groups of the Russian populists and down to a thousand *Capital* vol. 1 reading groups today. So perhaps this is one first approximation to the 'Our' in *Our Death*; although what I wanted to say when I started this paragraph was that I've enjoyed going back to *The Commons* in part because its improvisational/open character means that it doesn't have that sense of finality that is now so much more omnipresent, in Sean's writing as elsewhere (see: 'everyone's writing their last book', or however that line runs in Sean's own).<sup>12</sup>

One more thing. There's no pathos in any of those instances I just quoted: the dead are people who you can just tell to get up, they are people who are 'like, safe'. They can even be 'acquired' like a transferable skill. The treatment of death is omnipresent but un- or anti-dramatic. '[L]ike our ancestors are / like safe now / ok, forget that' is perhaps a re-writing of the Benjamin line about how even the dead will not be safe,<sup>13</sup> now reorganised as the conviction that they definitely are, stated offhandedly or a bit tentatively, as if the idea is just being tried out (and I'm not sure what to make of 'ok, forget that': does it mean the foregoing is UNTRUE—stupid, complacent, unthinking—or that it's a truth that needs to be kept between us—'if anyone asks, you didn't see anything'—something that can only be true if it's left unsaid or hushed up?). In any case I want to stick to the relationship between death and study, necromancy and the collectivisation or socialisation of heretical knowledge: I think it's important for the aesthetics and the politics of this work, written just before the letters, that death is often treated offhandedly, casually, anti-dramatically, while study is volatile, tumultuous, unpredictable: 'your nights of monstrous study':<sup>14</sup> that whole Rimbaudian idea of study as revolutionary drama, or as immediate and direct involvement in the thing studied:

no scholarly distance, no objectivity, no dissecting gaze, but a kind of instantaneous RE-LIVING, a raising of the dead of its own kind, at which point I realise that the raising of the dead was always related to study anyway, and the two ideas just kind of collapse into one another or merge: ok, forget that.

So the answer to the question ‘why *The Commons*’ would be that it helps to bring into view this moment in the poetry when the dead are always being RAISED, which feels so different to me to the moment when it seems like all the living are perpetually on the verge of dying; and also because there is just so much *détournement* in Sean, such a vast, singular amount of it, so many recompositions performed upon the writings of so many dead authors, political theorists, communists, drug addicts, that those *détournements* become inseparable from, or even just the substance of, his sense of revolutionary education and the living, collective practice that runs all the way through his writing even when he seemed most devastatingly alone.

### ***Letters Against the Firmament (2015)***

**Lisa Jeschke:** One of the arguments that runs most consistently, for me, through the *Letters* is an argument that might be summarised as ‘all death is political’. These letters start just before the Tottenham Riots of 2011, with the ‘Letter on Poetics (after Rimbaud)’ published on Sean’s blog *Abandoned Buildings* on 25 June 2011, and are fuelled throughout by a riotous anger about police violence.<sup>15</sup> In one of the earliest letters, the ‘Letter on Silence’, we read, arranged in a factual list and all the more brutal for that: ‘(1) They had banged his head on the floor and they were giving him punches. [...] (5) I went to speak to his mum. (6) He couldn’t even stand up after they hit him with the batons. (7) They knocked on her door three hours later and told her “your son’s died”’.<sup>16</sup>

A poetry of speaking the names of the victims of police violence is briefly begun in the same letter, only to be overwhelmed by the scale of the brutality: ‘it’s a bullet [...], as in the actual content of the collective idea we have to live beneath. They’ve got that idea lodged in the centre of Mark Duggan’s face – or Dale Burns, or Jacob Michael, or Philip Hulmes. Hundred [sic] of invisible faces. And those faces have all exploded’ (*Letters*, 13). In the ‘Second Letter on Harmony’, the ‘idea lodged in the centre’ is re-translated into the police bullet again: ‘in Genoa, the anarchist Carlo Giuliani got a police bullet in the centre of his face. Remember that name’ (*Letters*, 35). You already mentioned the drama of revolutionary study, and I think Sean was a student of *both* the present moment (the recent deaths just mentioned, which for the government become ancient, buried history as soon as they happen) *and* of the past, refusing to see these as separate or to allow his own writing to become nicely circumscribed

‘contemporary poetry’. In the same way we need to remember the names of Mark Duggan or Carlo Giuliani, we need to remember Baraka, Blanqui or Rimbaud; it’s as if this book *as and by poetry* tried to assemble a revolutionary army: ‘For Ernst Bloch, the revolution was the crossroads where the dead come to meet’ (*Letters*, 33). I always feel like I can breathe better when reading Sean’s work because of the historical reach that opens up: it’s like stepping onto a forest opening (at night), a vast city, an open field.<sup>17</sup>

The book’s naming of the past dead in conjunction with its testifying to a violent present also puts into further perspective the ‘easy target’ accusation (*Letters*, 113) that was at times raised against the *ad hominem* attacks on liberal politicians in Sean’s letters (such as: ‘I take the fact that Iain Duncan Smith continues to be alive as a personal insult’ (*Letters*, 47); ‘The Kidnap and Murder of David Cameron’ (*Letters*, 94)). These Tory names do not appear gratuitously as solo stars of Sean’s *Letters*, but instead as part of a whole personal-systemic constellation and in direct correlation with the names mentioned above of past revolutionaries and victims of police violence. To say that naming and thereby attacking Tory politicians is too easy is to very nearly also say that gratuitously (?!) mentioning the name of Carlo Giuliani is too easy, to walk away from him. Within this totalising capitalist cosmology, all death is political, even where we might confuse it for natural – and it is personal, person-bound – different factions die in different ways – death precisely does not strike ‘Every Man’ equally (‘Iain Duncan Smith continues to be alive’ is not just noted polemically as a ‘personal insult’, but also as a ‘fact’). If anything, these poetic attacks are not too easy, they are helpless: ‘I started thinking the reason the student movement failed was down to the fucking slogans. They were awful. As feeble as poems’. (*Letters*, 140) The task is too difficult, the asymmetry is too great. Maybe they are also necessarily and knowingly helpless – if they weren’t so helpless, they wouldn’t be so necessary, as the power of the Tories wouldn’t be so overwhelming. The ultimate aim for the poems is precisely not to have to murder; in his poetry, and as an argument across and beyond his poetry, Sean wants death (upheld by the Tories, or the EU, or the Federal Republic of Germany) to die, does not want to live in a world, in ‘the English-speaking world, where none of us know anything except how to kill’ (*Letters*, 141).<sup>18</sup>

**DH:** In one of your emails where we were talking about how to structure this piece you said that maybe the ‘chronological approach isn’t as conventional as it seems at first sight – because the chronology of the past ten years has driven this terrible fascist *logic* of ever-increasing pressure – so this temporal development itself *does* something? As in, in the way we keep getting these layers and layers of austerity and consequences and further consequences, and deaths and further deaths’. I think that’s true and represents a problem for Sean’s poetry of the 2010s as well as for the structure of our



commentary on it. The whole body of writing exists in a single historical sequence. It knows this and sets itself the task of defining it: ‘to hear’ what’s happening, as you said in the introduction. His work helped us to understand what that fascist logic of ‘increasing pressure’ *means*. No one else did that for us. And that’s one reason why we’re both disinclined to revert to existing academic/theoretical idioms for the period. Sean had his own idiom: why should we translate it into a more neutral one?

I want to say a few more words about this by way of a kind of interlude – maybe we can treat it as a comment on the early *Letters*. I suppose that what I’m saying above might sound like the general argument that poetry ‘does things’ that ‘theory’ can’t do.<sup>19</sup> I agree with that argument in principle, but it always raises in my head the same pair of doubts. First of all: who cares? Most people in the world have no idea what ‘theory’ is, except as some caricature of academic ‘excess’ pressed into service by state propaganda depts (as of 2021 the frontier-caricature is ‘Critical Race Theory’). Also, secondly, if theory just means communicable ideas, then for sure poetry needs them *desperately*, just like it needs images, rhythms, compositional procedures, traditions, typography, everything it can lay its fucking hands on. Why wouldn’t it? Do we not need eyes because we have feet? Part of the incredible rush of that first letter, Sean’s ‘Letter On Poetics’, upon first spoken encounter is that it was *full* of ideas, absolutely crawling with theoretical ideas from Brecht, Marx, Rimbaud, Weiss, Lenin, Tretiakov, Debord, etc., you name it. I don’t need to say to you that later on Sean’s references would get a little bit less – restrictive. The fact remains that what we’re talking about in terms of his readiness for Tory ‘necropolitics’ *took the form of a poetic programme*, the basis of which were articulate and confrontational ideas about what poetry should be, and what we should use it to do. The real problem with ‘theoretical’ terms and the ‘Theory’ in which they get enthroned is not that ideas are ‘restrictive’ while poetry is ‘free’ and ‘negatively capable’ (that is itself a very basic and uninteresting theory of poetry) but that they don’t tell us anything about what we should try with our art to achieve. By contrast, Sean’s writing argued that *poetry is important enough for it to be worth having ideas about*. That claim is its first and central idea: ‘After we achieved political understanding our hatred grew more intense, we began fighting, we were guided by a cold, homicidal repulsion, and very seldom did we find that sensation articulated in art, in literature’.<sup>20</sup> It is *not* not-knowing but techniques, methods of articulation and analysis, heuristic defences against all of the things that we already know, the ways we speak and think ourselves into defeatism, self-loathing or self-doubt, and a solution just as punk was once a solution to the sense of frustration and personal shapelessness that is the immediate consequence of a reality where so-called ‘art’ functions BY DENYING TO YOU the validity of your experiences, or by defining



them as unique personal deficiencies. Revolutionary poetry doesn't allow you to 'be yourself', whatever that is. It is a tool for people who have been *made to feel* that they are not complete people, as you put it so well when you say: 'Maybe I wouldn't fully have seen how extreme things were without the extreme language of Sean's poetry; austerity wasn't just a bit "problematic", it was everything and murdered people'.

Deeply articulated in all of those poetic arguments is a thought we didn't need back then. Poetry shows that whatever bourgeois anti-communication defines as personal failure—'homicidal repulsion', etc—is the material of a communicative politics. Identity: its basic materials. It's easier to see why this is more important in 2021 than it was back in 2011, now that so much 'political' discussion is taken up with the question of what an identity is.

**LJ:** One of the things you said in relation to *The Commons* that really struck me, and struck me as true, is this: 'This moment in the poetry when the dead are always being RAISED, which feels so different to me to the moment when it seems like the living are all on the verge of dying'. Not least, this made me think there is a difference between Sean writing about 'death', and 'the dead', and 'dying'. What are the nuances between these? Now that I stare at the term 'the dead', it makes me think that referring to them in this way almost already configures them as in some way alive, personified, in human shape, so that 'the dead' and 'the undead' necessarily converge into one another, as you can't imagine 'the dead' not having some kind of shape and motion. And this is not just as a logical paradox, but something that feels very true of the way the dead are portrayed in Sean's work as still there, with the potential of being raised, as you say, a sociality that becomes especially palpable in *Our Death* – only with the shift, again as you noted, of it then being the living on the verge of dying as opposed to the dead on the verge of living again. Maybe there is a third modality around this though, if the 'dead' are situated less temporally than on a parallel spatial plane, as in this passage from the *Letters*:

According to some cosmological systems, and ones not so far removed from our own as we would maybe imagine, when anyone dies – be that Margaret Thatcher or Mark Duggan – they take their place among what are called the 'invisibles', traditionally opening up a gap in social time, a system of antimatter in which nobody can live, but from which new understandings and arrangements of social harmony may be imagined. Music, for example. Or the killing of a 'king', etc. But while I'd like that to be true, its essentially hymn-singing, a benevolent glister on the anti-cyclonic storms of business-as-usual rotating counterclockwise at ever increasing speeds into the past and into the future. I take those 'invisibles' as being not too

dissimilar to so-called ‘undesirables’, all those refugees banged up in the various holding cells that cluster in rings outside airports and cities etc. (*Letters*, 38)

The ‘place’ of ‘invisibles’<sup>21</sup> sketched here feels like a parallel plane in an almost Dantean world, two groups converging in the same no-place, one from the side of the dead, one from the side of the living: 1) anyone who dies, be that Margaret Thatcher or Mark Duggan, dead, but alive, and 2) really existing refugees, alive, but dead. I guess there is a trace of the concept of ‘relative surplus populations’ in this, too.<sup>22</sup> It’s not so much as if a spatial imagination superseded a temporal one; rather we observe here forms of translation: a bridging of chronological distances, the living linking up to past figures from basically any century, with time itself transformed into a spatial architecture (‘a gap in social times’) where everyone is constantly co-existent, only on various different planes. And those planes are spinning and swishing, not just across borders but the universe – ‘rotating counterclockwise at ever increasing speeds into the past and into the future’, so it’s a chaos-universe, not one of fixed constellations or stillness.

One more minor note on this passage, because you were wondering about ‘ok, forget that’, these kinds of throwaway, but significant interjections – I think it’s a move Sean often does, to state something very extreme but then also semi-pull back, partly maybe as a self-critique of his own position as a poet-speaker: am I really saying the right thing? Can poetry really be as revolutionary as I hope and think it is? And something similar occurs in the passage above: ‘But while I’d like that to be true’, so after expanding on this whole image of a world where the dead go, he breaks off for a moment – only to then yo-yo back out even further to this world where now living refugees are *with* the dead. Is this speculative thinking? A kind of teasing thinking? Dialectical thinking? Experimental thinking? Self-critical thinking? Are these in some ways rhetorical questions and self-critiques to get away with the sometimes-pathos of the *Letters*? In the sense of: ‘I know I’ve just said this completely intense thing – not sure myself if it’s really true – but let me continue because actually of course it is true and now that I’ve conceded doubt, we can go with it and take it even further!’

I also wonder if these co-existent layered worlds have something to do with Marx’s and Baraka’s analyses of the capitalist inversions (1) of subject and object: ‘The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things’,<sup>23</sup> and (2) of logic and madness under such conditions: ‘The Revolutionary Theatre [...] should stagger through our universe correcting, insulting, preaching, spitting craziness ... but a craziness taught to us in our most rational moments’.<sup>24</sup>

Sean's writing conducts similar inversions as to the status of the (apparently) living and the (apparently) dead, whereby to an extent they might be switched, or folded into one another, or come to express themselves through one another. And similarly, there is the description of quotidian mundanity under Tory restoration as hugely catastrophic: the sense of every day repeating mundanely, of there not being very much to do or enjoy or buy even, of it being impossible to make any plans or see a future, and then the inversion that precisely this extinction of experience and feeling, this trivial non-feeling, actually is hugely catastrophic and punishing. I mean passages like 'Sometimes I have to stay in bed all day because of it, this maddening weakness, hollow nausea. I bet you think I'm exaggerating' (*Letters*, 95) and 'You know I'm not exaggerating' (*Letters*, 99), which play with a split between social realism (mundanity) and social realism (the catastrophe of the everyday). In such passages, Sean often works via opposition with regard to the imagined interlocutor, the kind of liberal who would probably try to tell you that things are not so bad and that the West has won at life. Sometimes I've felt like this interlocutor was sketched in a slightly vague, uncharacteristically fictionalising way, as if Sean just needed the shadow of an addressee to make the letters letters, so different from the really specific attacks on Tory figures. But maybe this makes sense as a triangular constellation: the speaker-I as a bohemian-lumpenproletarian figure; Tory party heads as the real antagonists; and the figure of the liberal as a kind of friend, addressed with a certain fondness, yet also a secondary antagonist, kind of there, kind of not, kind of evasive, kind of a cloud, kind of the death penalty.

**DH:** Yeah I think that that's exactly right. And one thing to add is about what conditions that kind of polemical inversion. It's totally bound up with the rejection of the way in which death is ceremonialised: how 'respect for life' comes to be identified with respect for the particular lives of state authority figures. Death-in-public is God Save the Queen, Westminster Abbey, horse-drawn carriages and osteoporotic colonels paying their last respects; and respect for the dead is monarchism, colonial nostalgia, good old Queen Bess and boiled sweets at the newsagent on Saturdays. It wasn't enough for Sean just to 'point that out'; his poetry had to pull down the whole stage-set, all that submissiveness and deference and stupidity painted to look like some categorical imperatives.

And relativising death was central to all that. I mean, the prohibition against murder (including self-murder) is such a common denominator baseline of individual morality, no? And insofar as individual morality is the perceptual straitjacket from which states derive tremendous advantage – which is to say, insofar as we are always bound by a code of conduct that *it* has never even recognised – doesn't

that prohibition need to be eliminated? Think about ‘Against Ritual’, on the death parties for Thatcher in 2013: ‘It was horrible. Deliberately so. Like the plague-feast in *Nosferatu*. I loved it’ (*Letters*, 99). Sean celebrating the crassness of it, the paradoxical, joyful mean-spiritedness, the theatrical self-embodiment of the fears that upstanding middle-class people project onto the poor in secret whenever they walk past them in the street. Celebration of the death drive is compressed anti-moralism, compressed anti-individualism, compressed negation of the *refusal* to think about collective ‘politics’ that individual ethical codes always imply; and also compressed ‘anti-politics’, insofar as politics in its legislative-representative theatre is ALWAYS individual morality performed at gunpoint. Think of the strained expression perennially disfiguring the face of Keir Starmer: one daily spectacle that we can be grateful that Sean was mostly spared. (And I think in this connection of Jacob Bard-Rosenberg’s classic essay on the physiognomies of judges, which deals with the biological blowback-effect of the same homicidal pieties.)<sup>25</sup>

That last paragraph might sound as if it’s describing something quite different to the atmosphere of, say, a BLM protest in June 2020. It is. But the connecting thread is still there, I think. It’s about crowd morality. Crowd morality and individual morality obey totally different laws, bring different laws into being, define different laws, in the same way that quarks obey different laws to the ones we associate with Mr. Bucket and his fat under-current of forefinger.<sup>26</sup> Sean Bonney was the greatest ever poet of ‘killing no murder’, *but he couldn’t say or think or feel the things he did* against the grain of the dominant reality without a mob to help him say and think and feel them.<sup>27</sup> Leaving Trafalgar Square at the party’s end: ‘already that foul, virtuous fear was sinking back into me’ (*Letters*, 99). He knew that about himself.

But to change tack a little. What you say in your last two paragraphs makes more sense for me of what you wrote in our initial abstract about ‘Romanticism’ and ‘Realism’ in Sean’s writing. The bridges and wormholes between those two realities. It’s just such a consistent part of his thinking, right up to the point at which the two states can no longer be bridged and seem instead ominously to merge, or to run together, on the threshold of a drug psychosis that is at once ludicrously hyperbolic and as real as it can possibly be. Obviously Sean was *always* a passionate and voracious reader (and... user) of Romantic literature, of its reveries and visions and autumn and silk and nothingness; but is it too stupid and crude to see a transition here? In the writing of 2011, what you’re talking about in terms of the grammar of movement in the chaos-universe of the writing was still a difficult task to be undertaken. There are times in *Our Death* when the collapse and intermingling of vision and social reality (‘Romanticism’ and ‘Realism’) just feels like a violent and frightening *fait accompli*. Reality collapses *all by itself*... and by the time of *Cancer* and the final prose poems, the

most important movement is not the movement between its various ‘dimensions’ but instead between multiple personae whose own programmatic metamorphoses run on a trajectory that leads with ever more terminal velocity *away* from the named, the visible and the legally or historically identifiable, towards a series of disappeared poets, hunted people, animals and dust: or towards the residual or unspoken belief that each of these might contain all of the others.

### ***Our Death* (2019)**

LJ: Yes, and just to loop back slightly before thinking our way into *Our Death* further, I would like to comment on two more passages from the *Letters*. This is from the ‘Letter Against Sickness’:

George Osborne came up [on TV] [...] I turned the volume up and just as I did he was saying the words ‘our NHS’. The weight that pronoun carried was unbearable. Because Osborne, who presumably doesn’t actually use the NHS, who probably has never sat in a waiting room in, say, the Whipps Cross Hospital, was claiming some kind of possession that was entirely stolen, and claiming to share it with some kind of absolutely occupied ‘us’. It changed everything: the bland hotel room, the banal beating of the sea, all of it congealed into Osborne’s pronunciation of ‘our’. (*Letters*, 103)<sup>28</sup>

The other one is from the ‘Letter on Poetics’:

Rimbaud hammered out his poetic programme in May 1871, the week before the Paris Communards were slaughtered. He wanted to be there, he kept saying it. The ‘long systematic derangement of the senses’, the ‘I is an other’, he’s talking about the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity [...]. Obviously you could read that as a simple recipe for personal excess, but only from the perspective of police reality. (*Letters*, 141)

The first passage, from ‘Letter Against Sickness’, reads almost like a foil for *Our Death* (and its subsection *Cancer*, a title that is itself puzzling in its proclamation of sickness as objectivity / as community?) in that it engages with the demolition of the NHS specifically through its outrage at the Tory appropriation of the collective plural pronoun ‘we’ in its possessive form, ‘our’. The ‘weight that pronoun carried’ becomes unbearable because this appropriation is both linguistic and ideological *and* financial and physical: language is material. Osborne’s ‘our’ might be read in the following two almost conflicting, yet concurrent senses: (1) to obscure the ongoing privatisation of the NHS, the Tories work all the harder to construct the national(ist) lie of a ‘we’

around it; (2) when Osborne says ‘our’, possessively, he speaks a horrible truth insofar as it is being parcelled into private property. So then with ‘our’ death, using exactly that same pronoun, Sean (3) enacts a reappropriation of an appropriation; and (4) realistically describes how, if it’s the Tories’ NHS, conversely it must be our death. Whose death? Our death. Our Death! (Why aren’t there more morbid demonstration slogans?!)

The second of these quotations – from the ‘Letter on Poetics’, the reading of Rimbaud’s ‘I is an other’ as not ‘a simple recipe for personal excess’, but a collectivist statement rooted in the political praxis of the Paris Commune – puts into perspective the ‘I’-heaviness of the *Letters*, allowing us to perceive this ‘I’ never just as itself, but always also as an other. At least that’s the aim: when I read the *Letters*, I still can’t help perceiving a solo voice more forcefully than a collective one, maybe something reinforced by the genre of the letter (and Sean’s many – great – readings from the *Letters*; sometimes I wish there were more poetry readings with other readers than the poet: I is an other!). *Our Death* initially seems to continue with a similar voice, taking up the letter form again (e.g. ‘Letter in Turmoil’, *OD*, 67), although they are now increasingly framed as more casual notes (e.g. ‘Further Notes on Teargas’, *OD*, 97) or headed by (mock-)thematic titles (‘On Being a Good Person’, *OD*, 77). And also, in spite of the overall title, *Our Death* does operate significantly with the ‘I’-pronoun, the speaker-figure staged as a cross of an early modern ‘ranter’, a flâneur and a Beat figure, or think John Wieners in his hotel room, in states of intoxication and loneliness – a figure attracted less by the bright lights of the arcades than the dark glow of the canals:

I head to the canal and stand there staring at the swans, and pronounce certain words of shrivelled power. Theresa May, for example. Stephen Crabb. Of course, these words only have purchase in the Land of the Dead, but still I recite them, their syllables grinding together like the ghosts of medieval machinery, like a parade of headless skeletons or the wonder of a ghost train perfectly preserved in post-apocalyptic brine, the auditory bleach we bathe in every day. The Landwehrkanal. Rosa Luxembourg etc. (*OD*, 67)

And yet, while there is a staging of urban-Romantic loneliness in this wandering figure, and while in many ways it could be said that *Our Death* is an apparently more melancholy, more resigned book than the *Letters*, on another level it reads as more fundamentally collective, filled with desire for friendship and constant conversation with the speaker’s surroundings. I’m thinking for example of ‘From Deep Darkness’,







‘birds that screech of all the terrible things that might happen’ (118). Where we reach the limits of language in *Our Death*, we hear either the echoes of ‘*fuck the police*’ (*Corpus Hermeticum* in *Letters*, 29), or the unpleasantly shrill sound of screeching: no profound Beckettian silences. Sean’s world is a baroquely cosmological world filled to the brim, with curses, and sirens and screeches, conversations, the figures of the living and the dead.

The dead is also where the third line of the above quotation takes us, for it only becomes clear here that these friends who are blackbirds, or blackbirds who are friends, are in fact *dead* friends: ‘murdered by rising rents’. Again the bird seems to be a messenger figure from the realm of the dead (like a poem is), traversing the zones of the living and the dead as much as (nearly as divided) cross-European zones: ‘Exarchia Kreuzberg Athens’. With *Our Death*, Sean’s work becomes more explicitly internationalist. Maybe the most striking turn in this sequence, however, is ‘we survive / at random’. The classical *vanitas*-trope that could be expected would be more likely ‘we die / at random’ – as if death was egalitarian on account of its arbitrariness. The idea that ‘we survive / at random’, however, seems to imply that the logical norm within a murderous neoliberal regime of rising rents – in Athens, Berlin or London – is that we die systematically.

This also means that the realms of the living and the dead are hardly separate anymore. Birds appear as messenger figures between them; ‘the dead’ are no longer shadowy personifications or revolutionary armies, but reappear in this world as blackbirds, living animals; and the living are already near-dead insofar as any other day of survival is random luck. Maybe this also means, even further, that to not yet have died is a failure in solidarity. Which you could read as extremely sad and morbid (even as a renunciation of leftist, progressive politics), or as an insistence that life and death are not infinitely removed from one another – even as the expression of a desire: for an orgy of skeletons, coming together and community, the hung hanging out; for a ‘horizontal’ or ‘social space’<sup>30</sup> as envisioned by the Paris Commune, but extending even further: ‘no borders’ between living and dead. This is maybe also in qualification of the more extreme notion of ‘all death is political’, which would imply that any personal acceptance of death or desire for death might be reactionary, or at least a resigned giving in to reactionary forces. But especially from a queer perspective, which is an underlying thread in *Our Death*,<sup>31</sup> you could also say the desire for immortality has a patriarchal quality – so many fathers hovering around us. And you could say the desire for a petrified immortality is anti-dialectical: as if the loops, steps, circles, free-falls, leaps and bounds, sequences, series, weeks, months and years of temporal movement and of historical materialism more generally should not apply to – people.

**DH:** Going to start with a very crude and simple-minded reduction of your last mail, just because I'm feeling crude and simple-minded, and also very aware of the possibility of not starting at all. There seem to be three main lines in the thinking you develop about the later poetry:

- \* inversion – the living are the dead, the dead the living
- \* the meaning of extreme or 'intense' claims
- \* solidarity with the animal/animals.

I think perhaps it's easiest for me to start with the second of them. The truth of each individual 'claim' in the poetry is obviously inseparable from its position in the whole network of contradictory claims that come immediately before and after it, but which also appear at a much greater remove, across distances, like those wires between cities: tenuous, breakable threads that are expected to span thousands of miles of sea or air and could snap at any minute. I used to think that was a 'Hegelian' way of thinking, but now I think perhaps it has something to do with the desire to create things that are extremely easy for a reader, or Sean Bonney, to destroy. Fragility is an essential aspect of whatever it is that the poetry is saying about life and death. Whatever it is, the truth of it is easy to ruin. We can so easily fuck it up. And this poetry that tells us to murder Tories in the street also tells us that there are things that we have to say to one another that are so delicate and so impermanent that as soon as we try to concentrate on them, they evaporate or crumble, like our own ageing and diseased bodies, into dust and earth. The lines in *Our Death* that seem 'weakest' to me are those which allow no space for those 'wires', in which the different elements of Sean's imaginary cosmos pile up on top of one another in the form of lists, and the impulse to metaphorical elaboration appears to congeal into a tic, or a conscious act of exhausted self-sabotage, in sequences like (but this is clearly a travesty) a dream is a cell is a key is a planet revolving is a plague; so that the relationships become too strong, seem to thicken or harden somehow, and this incredible painful lightness that you get elsewhere in the writing, its sense of a truth built up out of chance associations and persisting across wide tracts of empty space, snaps and falls away, and it takes time for that lightness to return – perhaps you have to stop reading for a few days, hold the work at arm's length, come back to it. And I guess it's inevitable that the lines in the book that (for me at least) get at this most beautifully are also mutilated, blown up and wrenched out of the poem in which they first appeared:

There was, deep inside this so-called world, something that had no price. No gold could buy it, no church could sing it, no-one could understand it. It appeared directly

in the middle of life, and it meant nothing but itself. For a while I hated it, like everybody else, then all of a sudden it filled my entire reality. I still don't understand it. What it was. Why it mattered so much, and what is the nature of the hole that is left now that it has gone. But most of all I can't understand the rage with which we would tear it apart, such hatred against a love so impossible, and so beautifully broken.<sup>32</sup>

Those lines come from 'In Fear of Memory', which later is broken up and embedded like shrapnel into 'The Chorus is On Fire //// Landscape with Burning Truck', in which the formulation 'I was found in the morning. Recognised by my teeth, what was left of my fingerprints' becomes "'found you in the morning. recognized you by your teeth. by what was left of your fingerprints'" (OD, 121) in quotation marks: one of the few places in Sean's poetry where 'you' might credibly mean 'me'. And in tandem with this sudden confusion you get this new white-noise of guilt and self-doubt: 'you are worried you may have murdered your closest friend'. (OD, 121) It's such a strange place for this poetry to end, when it has made such a unique virtue of knowing the difference between us and them, and is so filled with accusatory yous, sellout and liberal yous, professorial and *Guardian*-reader yous with whom the speaker wants nothing to do (though as you say, he keeps on writing to them). But it also tracks the tone of these last poems, the final movement in them, which in some ways is away from death, the interchange of the dead and the living that happens so often in *Cancer*, in the book's first part, towards something different: 'the gentle sounds you make'; 'It was so silent here, so gentle'. And then in the final epigram by Lucy Parsons – in fact the last words in the book, if we exclude the Acknowledgements – 'You are not absolutely defenseless. For the torch of the incendiary, which has been known to show murderers and tyrants the danger line, beyond which they may not venture with impunity, cannot be wrested from you – Lucy Parsons' (OD, 122).<sup>33</sup> A protective voice that comes up out of the darkness and speaks to us, addresses us, as 'you', to soothe and promise to us the reality of our strength, in a voice that is also 'gentle', and that presupposes by virtue of the fact that it addresses us like this that we DO feel defenseless, weak, guilty, attacked by self-rage or accusation. So that at last in *Our Death* the poet-avatar, confused, self-accusing and turning on himself, even as he continues to blur into Pasolini, Rosa Luxemburg, the nameless figure of the disappeared, the murdered and assassinated of every genuine uprising against capital, becomes after all these dozens upon dozens of letters – the addressed.

Or perhaps that's just some pompous bullshit and I don't know what I'm arguing. I don't know. All I'm saying is I hear a strain of guilt in these last poems that can't be self-expiated and that needs to let someone else speak: and that in the end even the 'we' drops away, and a different kind of 'you' becomes possible to that of all the

enemy-addressees that the poetry has mocked and spat at and obsessively measured its distance from. Also that this idea of ‘friends’ as ‘blackbirds’ or ‘wires’ suggests something about the way the poetry itself speaks: that *Our Death* is not just one book, or even four books compiled into one, but many books that have been broken up, fragmented or isolated *and in which the parts nevertheless remain in contact with one another*, by all of these tenuous threads, so that it’s possible to see somehow in and throughout all of the devastation and despair of this final work another, spectral poetry in which there is NOTHING BUT gentle noises, silence, and voices of reassurance: a language that both does and does not exist: ‘sometimes, when a specific distortion in the vowels is achieved / we can hear heaven. it is a kind of wall’ (*Happiness*, 14).

I think there’s a connection here with ‘animals’. I’ll approach this in the laziest way possible: if you Ctrl+F ‘animal’ in the PDF of *Our Death*, there are many instances of that word, but they all appear in the book’s final third. Of course there are specific animals in *Cancer*, like Gogou’s blackbirds in the passage from which you quoted. But it’s as if in the later poems Sean is beginning to notice a pattern in his own writing: ‘[I] [...] dream that I’m some kind of hunted, carnivorous animal’ (*OD*, 98), ‘a tiny, frightened animal is scratching at the dust and earth’ (99), ‘several animals burning’ (108). The beautiful defensiveness of the poetry (I love you all so fucking much) is so deeply connected to this sense of being (a) speechless, or of having no use for speech; (b) hunted/exterminated; (c) feral/undomesticated; and finally (d) capable of a solidarity that has absolutely fucking nothing to do with ‘politics’ or anything more complicated than the fact that we live, breathe, have blood in our bodies and shriek when we are wounded. Solidarity with animals entails the repudiation of humanity as a kind or armature: ‘that appalling privilege’.<sup>34</sup> If only some of us get it, I don’t want it. And on that basis there is just so much to reject, because ‘human’ society is all about stamping on people and telling them what they can’t have.<sup>35</sup>

And somewhere in the unspoken zone of implication in this poetry is the thought: it would be better to be dead than live like that. (A grammar that I will always associate with your poetry, by the way.) And the challenge of it, to us: that this isn’t just an empty assertion, or some kind of metaphor. I would rather die than be a human if some humans are made to live like animals; and I would rather live like an animal than be a human if humans assume that only they can really live. So where do we go from here? I’d like to think more about this question of the blackbirds. Obviously ‘the’ animal is a terrain full of the academic coffins we spoke about before: traps scattered about in a second-growth forest of reifications. And maybe there’s something in this sketch I’m missing anyway? There’s another side to the question, to do with Pasolini, Gogou: the animal that scratches in the dust, the injunction to ‘drink with the unemployed /

with all sun and silence / with all dust in the sun and silence' (*OD*, 25). Dust of poverty, dust of death. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust. But also dust as vitality, life, splendid miserable cities; not the pointless death-in-life of the clean and expensively educated reader. And maybe here is where we get to us vs. them again: 'Our word for Death is not their word for Death' (*OD*, 96). The title of the book as a contraction of that line: Our Death. The most expansive communist idea: that everything can be expropriated. Even that.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In other words, resistance to state violence means insisting on the value of the life that it discards; but of course it's still possible to draw from this false aesthetic and political conclusions. For one reflection on these questions in a form that is familiar to any reader of Sean's work, see Idris Robinson, 'Letter to Michael Reinhoehl', *Ill Will*, 24/10/2020. <<https://illwill.com/letter-to-michael-reinhoehl>> accessed 22 May 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), *marxists.org*. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch07.htm>> accessed 10 December 2021. For a more recent uptake of the term 'social murder' in the context of the pandemic, see Kamran Abbasi, 'Covid-19: Social Murder, They Wrote – Elected, Unaccountable, and Unrepentant', *BMJ*, 372:314 (2021), <<https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n314>> accessed 10 December 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> A non-party-aligned canvassing sticker seen around London during the run-up to the 2019 UK general election (with some still around now) read: 'The families burnt to death in Grenfell can't vote. The homeless who died in tents can't vote. The Windrush deportees who died of stress can't vote. The 130,000 people killed by austerity can't vote. Remember them, come out on 12 December for them, vote out the Tories for them. [...] Vote Labour on the 12th December'.
- <sup>4</sup> We are aware of the potential 'ambiguity' or even emptiness of the formulation 'left-wing', but alternative constructions (Marxist, communist) sound inappropriately theoretical. Sean was a leftist poet. It was one of the accomplishments of his writing that it made 'leftism' feel less like a set of academic positions and more like an attitude.
- <sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that death is exclusive to the 2010s, nor that traces of death only now started to appear in Sean's writing – see especially the formal dissection of Blairism and its foreign policies as well as the use of historically wide-ranging tropes of violence, burning or poisons found in the volumes collected in *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005).
- <sup>6</sup> I am thinking here of a Leninist dictum that was important for Sean: the idea that a 'correct' slogan or artwork or political analysis should offer a concrete analysis of the 'concrete situation'. Some discussion of this idea can be found in Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 103.
- <sup>7</sup> See 'The Commons – Sean Bonney', *Opened*. <<http://www.opened.com/print/the-commons-sean-bonney.html>> accessed 22 May 2021.

- <sup>8</sup> *Wake Up Dead Man: Afro-American Work Songs from Texas Prisons*, collected and edited by Bruce Jackson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).
- <sup>9</sup> Sean Bonney, *The Commons* (London: Opened, 2011). A version of Book II from which these quotes were taken is here: <<http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/436447/4272776/1254103816363/sean-bonney-the-commons-ii.pdf?token=EHpW4Qw3Jn3ZiwXqzRWun2386Jw%3D>> accessed 22 May 2021. This is what I used when I wrote this email. I last saw my copy of *The Commons* when I lent it to a friend in around 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> Luke Roberts, 'That Death, That Decade: Sean Bonney', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 13 (2021), p. 56: 'Sean was ready for 2010 ... had understood the scale of the social catastrophe even before it had fully taken hold'.
- <sup>11</sup> Poetry Emergency: A North West Radical Poetry Festival took place in Salford and Manchester in November 2018. Recordings, including the reading by Sean mentioned in the text, can be accessed online at <<https://poetryemergency.wordpress.com/recordings/>> accessed 15 July 2022.
- <sup>12</sup> 'These days everyone is writing their final book', "'Thrash Me!'", *Our Death* (Oakland: Commune, 2019), p. 79. All further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the text (abbreviation: *OD*).
- <sup>13</sup> '[N]ot even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious' (Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', trans. by Dennis Redmond. <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.htm>> accessed 22 May 2021).
- <sup>14</sup> '[Y]our nights of monstrous study / we | as in glycerine / as sexual research we | we shit in your fucking guts / hello' (Sean Bonney, *Happiness* (London: UnKant, 2011), p. 17). 'Under a flood of light / During terrible evenings of study' (Arthur Rimbaud, 'Movement', in *Complete Works by Rimbaud*, trans. by Wyatt Mason (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 269). The line comes from *Illuminations*.
- <sup>15</sup> Jennifer Cooke notes the almost prophetic quality of the first Letters: 'The "Letter on Riots and Doubt", written 5<sup>th</sup> August 2011 and therefore the day before the riots broke out, pre-empted and predicts their necessity [...]. Uncanny, this Sean Bonney, this urban poet-seer' (Jennifer Cooke, 'Sean's Four Letter'd Words', in Sean Bonney, *Four Letters / Four Comments* (Scarborough, ME: Punch Press, 2011), no page numbering).
- <sup>16</sup> Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p. 12. All further citations will refer to this edition and will be given in the text (abbreviation: *Letters*). The list partly rearranges this report on Jacob Michael's death: Ian Bone, 'COPS APPEAL FOR CALM IN WIDNES AFTER THEY MURDER YET ANOTHER MAN', 24/8/2011 [blogpost]. <<https://ianbone.wordpress.com/2011/08/24/cops-appeal-for-calm-in-widnes-after-they-murder-yet-another-man/>> accessed 22 May 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> In a final interview, Sean stated with regard to *Our Death* and his interest in Katerina Gogou: 'My book was insisting on Gogou's work still being alive – unfinished business, as it were. I was trying to add historical depth to my book, because I didn't want it to just be my Brexit book. I wanted it to be more than that. I wanted it to be a book that said: No, we're in a tradition' ('Their

Own Pantheon: Sean Bonney Interviewed by Jeffrey Grunthaler', *BOMB*, 11/12/2019. <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/sean-bonney/>> accessed 22 May 2021).

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Richard Owens from 2012, Sean says both that he thinks that Iain Duncan Smith should be shot and that he's aware that this 'dehumanises' him (Sean). See damnthecaesars, 'SEAN BONNEY IN CONVERSATION', *YouTube*, 22/06/2012. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHkj96VI08c>> accessed 22 May 2021. In this case by drawing on different conversational formats (the *Letters*, an interview with Sean) and in other passages, we might at times risk conflating the speaker of the poems and Sean, the person – something to be attentive to, yet mirroring a carefully constructed slippage at work in the *Letters* themselves.

<sup>19</sup> One place that argument is presented is in Andrea Abi-Karam and Kay Gabriel's Introduction to *We Want It All: An Anthology of Radical Trans Poetics* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2020), though of course even the title of that book indicates that its editors aren't interested in starting a competition between 'poetry' and 'theory' per se: and wanting it all continues to be one of the most credible theoretical programmes for poetic writing.

<sup>20</sup> Sean Bonney, 'Letter on Poetics', in Bonney, *Happiness*, p. 63. The next line is of course 'That last is from Peter Weiss'.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'invisible' is also a reference to David Rattray, *How I Became One of the Invisible* (New York: Semiotexte(e), 1992), of which Sean was a fan.

<sup>22</sup> The idea that you can step into and out of death then becomes very concrete: 'The relative surplus population exists in all kinds of forms. Every worker belongs to it during the time when he is only partially employed or wholly unemployed' (Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin 1990), p. 794). While Marx takes as fundamental categories those of 'worker' and employment, with unemployment as the exception, Sean sees unemployment as the more basic condition of capitalism: not only by writing from the perspective of 'a skiver, a drunk, a scoundrel, a villain, an addict, a down-and-out, a fuck up' (Prolapsarian, 'Notes to Sean Bonney (1969–2019)' [tumblr-post]. <<https://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/post/189486233632/notes-to-sean-bonney-1969-2019>> accessed 22 May 2021), but also by refusing to ignore whole sociological population groups fundamentally excluded from the labour market, 'undesirables'. Sean's poetry of course would not advocate 'full employment' as remedy, but to agitate against the fundamental 'unfreedom of work' (Prolapsarian).

<sup>23</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka, 'The Revolutionary Theatre', *Liberator*, July 1965. <<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf>> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Jacob Bard-Rosenberg, 'On the Physiognomy of Judges and Militant Poetics'. <[https://www.academia.edu/3560055/On\\_the\\_Physiognomy\\_of\\_Judges\\_and\\_Militant\\_Poetics](https://www.academia.edu/3560055/On_the_Physiognomy_of_Judges_and_Militant_Poetics)> accessed 22 May 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Mr. Bucket is the best character in Dickens. See *Bleak House*: 'through the placid stream of his life there glides an under-current of forefinger'.



- <sup>27</sup> Sometimes that mob will be a historical mob – the voices of rioters past – and sometimes it will be the mobs of Sean’s poetic present, but surely it’s just trivially true that he couldn’t have written as he did without the languages of collective struggle and insurgency on which he drew.
- <sup>28</sup> In October 2020, I presented some of the ideas of this conversation at the workshop ‘Value and Its Other(s)’ at the English Department, CAU Kiel, and I am grateful for the conversation and comments. One of the questions raised was why we would go to Sean Bonney’s work to think about death in this period, as opposed to, for example, interview NHS nurses. The answer is most likely not an either/or, yet the question presents an important challenge to the sometimes-solipsism (or assumed solipsism) of poetry – which Sean’s work itself continuously tried to struggle against.
- <sup>29</sup> On Sean’s earlier involvement with animal liberation, see Roberts, ‘That Death, That Decade’, p. 203.
- <sup>30</sup> Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 5 and p. 8.
- <sup>31</sup> In remarks such as ‘I have abolished my sex’ (74), the note ‘kill all straight men. You know they want it’ (118) in the context of a discussion of Pasolini, or the references to the figure of Tiresias as ‘She’ (120), incidentally linked up again with enhanced communication systems including birds: ‘She used to get information from the workings of birds but’. (OD, 120)
- <sup>32</sup> This version from Sean Bonney, ‘In Fear Of Memory (After Pasolini)’, 27/6/2017 [blogpost]. <<http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2017/06/in-fear-of-memory-after-pasolini.html>> accessed 22 May 2021.
- <sup>33</sup> Compare this named speaker who appears at the end of *Our Death* in order to address a ‘you’ who could be Sean Bonney to the anonymous ‘Revolutionary Legends’ that appear at the end of *Happiness*.
- <sup>34</sup> ‘sleep, that appalling privilege’, in ‘Let’s Not Chat About Despair’, OD, 95.
- <sup>35</sup> There’s even a way that this is a GENERAL reality with modifications across the boundary of class: for the working class, the reality of exclusion is all about violence; for the owning class, especially in ‘the West’, it’s all about moralised abstemiousness. Two different ways to die unsatisfied: by necessity and by choice. So many kinds of formal equality, and all of them equally bogus.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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