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ARTICLE

## 'A New Geography of Delight': Communist Poetics and Politics in Sean Bonney's *The Commons*

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The radical political thrust of Sean Bonney's poetry is well known and broadly understood, but it is not always clear in what way it is specifically communist, or even what communist poetry is beyond the utilization of slogans. For a poem to be genuinely communist it is arguably necessary for it to be a minor poetry, as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in their book on Kafka, otherwise it will be recuperable by a bourgeois mainstream that might be characterized as 'majoritarian'. Bonney's poem *The Commons*<sup>1</sup> is examined through the three characteristics of minor literature elucidated by Deleuze and Guattari and at the same time a concept of a minor, communist poetry is developed – it will be proletarian, experimental, always necessarily political because of its cramped conditions of existence and composition, and essentially collective. *The Commons* fulfils these conditions and at the same time offers, both potentially and simultaneously realized, a transformation of existing conditions at once angry and joyful, a new geography of delight.

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**Keywords:** Sean Bonney; Deleuze & Guattari; communism; minor literature;  
*The Commons*

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<sup>1</sup> Bonney, S. (2011), *The Commons*. London: Opened Press.

In Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno makes the claim that 'what is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions.'<sup>1</sup> He further makes the claim that:

Social struggles and the relations of classes are imprinted in the structure of artworks; by contrast, the political positions deliberately adopted by artworks are epiphenomena [. . .] Political opinions count for little.<sup>2</sup>

This suggests that what is politically significant about an artwork is to be found somewhere other than in the most obvious content, it is rather 'imprinted in the structure' and in the extent to which that which is immanent to the work moves against society, opposes it or confronts it. Political opinions, on the other hand, as expressed directly in the work, are beside the point, are mere by-products.

Sean Bonney's political opinions are no secret; he is a communist without sectarian affiliations but with 'anarchic tendencies',<sup>3</sup> a revolutionary, an opponent of capital and of the state. There are moments when this is, more or less, stated in his poetry; but it is still epiphenomenal, unreliable. The question is not what does Bonney say, or even what do his poems say, but rather what do his poems *do*.

This statement of the question brings me to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; they write in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what other things it does or does not transmit intensities<sup>4</sup>

It is certainly overstating the case to try to argue that Bonney's political thinking is irrelevant; after all, among the things a book by Bonney will function with are

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. (2013), *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. London, Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury. Kindle file, Chapter 12.

<sup>2</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Chapter 12.

<sup>3</sup> Bonney, *The Commons*, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix 2002, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. by Brian Massumi. London and New York: Continuum, p. 4.

his political ideas and some of the sources of those ideas; or those ideas as social constructs, bound up with various collective assemblages of enunciation; or significant materials and forces that inform Bonney's thinking and therefore his poetry and therefore how that poetry then transmits forces and intensities to me as I read. So Sean Bonney's political opinions are not irrelevant, but they are somewhat epiphenomenal insofar as what is transmitted to and through me when I read his poems are not what he means but what the poems do in conjunction with me and with the world as I live it. A world in which the political aspects of the poetry have significance and force whether I agree with them or not (I personally do) and in which they are identifiable.

*The Commons* is a poem in three sets, the title of which is suggestive of that which is held in common, 'owned' by all to be enjoyed and made use of by all, but also suggestive of the 'all' – all people, but 'common' people, 'ordinary' and working people, especially. 'Common' people are present in a multitude of ways throughout the poem, though never *represented* as such. They are present through fragments of folk and popular songs that are scattered across the poem's surface, through multiple discourses from any number of sources, and by default at least, the experiences to which such discourses allude. Such a multiplicity of discourses is held together by a particular style, a singular energy, by repetitions and echoes, and by a sense, quite simply, of an overall coherence, a sense that this is a recognizable world, albeit frequently presented in visionary hues. It seems to me to be a poem of clear political force, though in the absence of clear, programmatic political content – other than occasional references to Tories and fascists – this will need to be demonstrated. It is also clearly an experimental poem. The relationship between the poetry's experimentalism and its radical political force is one of the things I wish to examine here, with the aim of clarifying and examining that radicalism and its precise nature. I believe, in fact, that an examination of the specific experimentalism of this poem will begin to unfold and lay bare its politics. I will make an initial approach to this

through Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*,<sup>5</sup> and in particular through the concept of minor literature itself.

Deleuze and Guattari identify three characteristics of minor literature. The first of these is, quite simply, that it is constructed by a 'minority' 'within a major language'.<sup>6</sup> This concept of a 'minority' needs clarifying, particularly the fact that it is not concerned with numerical measure. A minority may be women, ethnic minorities, gay people, the working class; this list is not exhaustive, of course, but it is clear from the inclusion of women and the working class that it is not a numerical concept. The existence and construction of a minority in these terms involves, rather, a relationship with what is conceptualised as the 'majority' or, more accurately perhaps, the 'majoritarian'. An individual may be minoritarian, and so may a group that makes up the numerical majority. The relationship between the majoritarian and the minoritarian is a form of social relation that is based in conceptual assumptions that are themselves rooted in social and material power relations. Very broadly, the majoritarian are those in established power, at the center of social relations; the minor, or minoritarian, are those pushed out to the edges, or on the outside altogether.

Obviously, to some extent the majoritarian and the minor are bound together in a binary opposition. Continental philosophy and critical theory, particularly perhaps that associated with Derridean deconstruction, suggest that the terms of a binary opposition are not only bound together but that they infect each other, each drawing at least some of their force from the other. It also suggests that the deconstruction of a binary of this type proceeds first by overturning the violence of the hierarchy that the opposition is. In this case, the major is clearly and necessarily the dominant term; but Deleuze and Guattari have, via Kafka, constructed (conceptually speaking) this opposition in a way that already deconstructs it; they have also constructed it out of the social and political elements that are often implied to lie behind binary oppositions, to be revealed by their deconstruction.<sup>7</sup> That is to say that there

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Felix (1986), *Kafka Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan. Minnesota, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Hélène Cixous' 'Sorties' in Cixous, Hélène and Clément, Catherine (1986), *The Newly*

is nothing, no sense of ideology, for example, to be found lurking behind the opposition of the minoritarian and the majoritarian; instead, this opposition is already and immanently political and social, and reveals something that is social and political.

The majoritarian, currently actualized as Man – bourgeois, male, white, heterosexual, able bodied, cis-gendered – takes itself as *nature itself* and therefore as fixed, eternal and true – everything, everybody, else is defined in relation to the majoritarian and are found, inevitably, wanting. The minoritarian, on the other hand, is mobile, experimental and always in process, always becoming. This is not to say that this is true of all minorities or members of minor groups, but rather this is the necessary form of opposition to the majoritarian. Because Deleuze and Guattari, throughout their work, affirm difference and becoming rather than identity as ontologically primary, the dominance of the majoritarian, although necessarily assumed, is already overturned conceptually, though obviously not practically.

A majoritarian poetry, therefore, would be the dominant, politically conservative poetry of a particular society or historical epoch. It may very likely, but will not necessarily only, be produced out of the majoritarian group or groups of that society and it will certainly take on their assumptions and expectations. This will be clearer in some societies than in others; the majoritarian poetry in the United Kingdom in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century can easily be characterized as what Robert Sheppard has called the Movement Orthodoxy,<sup>8</sup> stemming from the powerful influence of poets such as Philip Larkin. This is a poetry that tends to present itself as unproblematically representational, conventionally moral, a poetry that assumes there are clear and impermeable boundaries between the individual and the social or the collective and has a broadly individualist ethos (that goes hand-in-hand with its moralism). It is often conventionally lyric, featuring conventional poetic form, although it may also make use of a simple form of free verse. Its primary distinguishing features are its attempts at stable, transparent representation based in a clearly distinguished,

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*Born Woman*, trans. by Betsy Wing. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Sheppard, Robert (2005), *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950–2000*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, pp. 20–35. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5949/upo9781846313806>

individual, 'common sense' and a moral or moralistic perspective, all of which appear natural and universal.

Minoritarian poetry, on the other hand, will by various strategies undermine or subvert common sense, moralism, the illusions of representational clarity. It will not always be stable but mobile, as I have already stated, possibly even delirious; it will be experimental and deterritorializing.

It is almost a defining feature of innovative poetry that such an experimental mobility will take different forms in different poems, but it can certainly be observed by reading the first lines of Set 1 of *The Commons*:

The cuckoo is a  
 – BANG –  
 he was a big freak:<sup>9</sup>

The poem begins with an apparent attempt, perfectly ordinary and grammatical, to make a statement about 'the cuckoo' that is then violently interrupted. Such an interruption would have produced some kind of violence-affect in any case, but the capitalized 'BANG' that constitutes the second line is obviously of itself violent. There is the violence of the onomatopoeia, of the signification, of the visual impact of the word's capitalization. The violence-affect is therefore maximized, more than redoubled, as I read the lines. There is always a certain mobility in the reading of a poem, even a conservative, mainstream or majoritarian poem; however, the violence-affect here produces a mobility of great force, deterritorializing force, as the poem, through the violence, changes its trajectory suddenly as though an explosion has knocked it off course. This sensation is produced in me as I read; there is an explosive sensation followed by a sense of having changed direction.

In the poem's composition through these sensations, and through the production, in the actualisation of the poem through reading, of these sensations in my body as a reader, the poem is an experiment in sensation and in the production of

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<sup>9</sup> Bonney, *The Commons*, p. 1.

sensation. The poem's trajectory through violence-affect is also my trajectory as I read and it is a trajectory that I have not travelled along before.

The third line, 'he was a big freak:', is composed in relation to the first two lines – and the very first line in particular – in a way that is perhaps not quite so unusual. It can be related to Bonney's practice in a number of his other poems and sequences insofar as it may or may not be directly related to the first line – it can be read either way – and it may nor may not be the same 'voice'. It might raise a number of questions – is the verb 'was' a replacement for 'is' in the first line because 'BANG' suggests that the cuckoo has been killed? Was the cuckoo going to be called a 'big freak' all along with only the tense being changed by the violence of the interruption? Or does the third line indicate a different object altogether? Is it something or someone else who was a big freak? If it is the latter, is the line, within the diegetic space of the poem, emitted from the same source, the same speaker, as the first line? These questions, it seems to me as I read, are by no means answered either way by the following lines:

weirds have wrappt his  
hail and gunnery,  
his pronouns and his minds:<sup>10</sup>

These lines shed little or no conventional light on the preceding ones, at least not as I read them. They take off in another direction altogether, tracing another (to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology again) line of flight, producing another movement of deterritorialization. This time there is a percept of a shift through time, as the use of 'weirds' as a plural noun and the spelling of 'wrappt' suggest both the archaic and the anachronistic.

There is uncertainty here, a sense perhaps of the chaotic, the poem both drawing on and producing chaos. It is, however, held together partly by its own cramped energy; I also find that my reading is held together by a sense of the demotic

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*



character of some of the phrasing that grounds the poetry's shifts in the 'everyday' and in common experience. It may be read as fragmentary; however, 'fragmentation' suggests a breaking down into separate pieces, whereas *The Commons*, like a lot of Bonney's work, builds up a multiplicity of utterances that, far from coming from a number of isolated sources, seem to come from anywhere, potentially, even from a certain lyric 'I', though one that cannot easily be identified as a controlling presence of mastery. This lyric 'I' might be read as binding the multiplicity together, supplying it with some sense of coherence. However, it does so by default; it does not do so through an active mastery. It is a passive principle of coherence, itself produced out of the multiplicity, each element of the latter being an element of *it*, without it ever being in control. This is not to say that the lyric 'I' has no force of its own; in fact, it is most clearly actualized through the energy of the poem's style, the multiplicity made to cohere and welded together by the poem's cramped energy. The poem presents a collective that cannot be assigned a distinct place within the social and cultural structures, it is without identity, a collective within which no discernibly individual utterance is lost, each retaining its specificity.

For example, across the six lines I have quoted from the beginning of Set 1 of *The Commons* it is possible to identify three or possibly four utterances, but none of these has an identifiable source, other than that one of them seems to issue from a pre-modern historical past. However, they *could* each share a reference – the cuckoo – as this might be suggested by the pattern of noun and pronouns (The cuckoo – he – his – his) even while this is not rendered *necessary*; the violent interruption of 'BANG' and the use of colons might suggest switches of source and of reference; such a switch might also be suggested by the modern lexis and poetic diction of 'his pronouns & his minds' relative to the archaic language of the two lines that precede it. Therefore, looking only at the play of sensation and signification, each line and phrase is both drawn together with each of the others and yet individuated in such a way that a straightforward identification is rendered as at least problematic.

*The Commons*, then, would seem to be what most readers would very likely recognize as an experimental text: it mixes utterances of different register and, it seems, source, even if the latter cannot be clearly identified; it combines modern and archaic lexis; it interrupts itself with violent outbursts; what coherence it has does not seem to be either semantic or syntactic, though there are suggestions of the possibility of coherence through these – and this is just across the first six lines. Moreover it is suggestive of a mobility of register, focus and lexis in a way that begins at least to turn away from, or present an alternative to, the dominant expression of Man as the natural, stable identity against which difference is defined.

Looking at the second characteristic of minor literatures, Deleuze and Guattari state that 'everything in them is political'.<sup>11</sup> This is because, as they put it, in minor literature, 'cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics.'<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Thorburn in *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*, writes that 'Practice is thus not a simple case of self-expression along legitimate social routes within which one "fits", but is a tentative maneuver around and within each situation.'<sup>13</sup> The 'individual intrigue', which is the essential subject matter of major literature, insofar as it exists in minor literature, will be continually up against its own context, including its own illegitimacy. There is no territory of assumed or recognizable or fixed landmarks, no open space within which a subject can move with apparent freedom. Rather there is a continually evolving series of blockages and checks to be escaped or transformed through the production of experimental trajectories. Every move made by a necessarily illegitimate (because not major which, as Nature, is the Law) minor literature will be connected to questions of identity, authority, legitimacy, territorialization and reterritorialization. These are social and political questions that, if answered in the affirmative on their own terms, will lead to reterritorialization and assimilation to the majoritarian, even via an apparent opposition to it. An assertion of identity, for example, leads inexorably to a claim for the legitimacy of that identity; which is to

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Thorburn, Nicholas (2003), *Deleuze, Marx and Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, p. 19.

say a claim for inclusion within the majoritarian, for assimilation to the mainstream. Further, such a claim and such an inclusion will also lead to claims for authority and dominance – over those who accept that identity, or who might be drawn into it whether they like it or not, at least.

Minor literature cannot therefore ever be involved with, for example, any kind of nationalist politics or conventional identity politics as these are always ultimately majoritarian, even if they are asserted in the name of an oppressed or minority group insofar as they lay claim to authority, and aim to be a 'dominant form of expression'. This is also why a fascist or right-wing poetry can never be minoritarian – fascist and right-wing poetry will always lay claim to authority, to being the ultimate majoritarian, will always aim to dominate. For similar reasons, some forms of left-wing poetry cannot be minor. Authoritarianism and the drive to dominate are incompatible with minor literature as they claim the impossible perspective, the space and the distance, necessary for claims to ultimate political or social authority.

*The Commons* lays no claim to any privileged perspective; there is no space from which to gain such a perspective on anything. The perspective is one of being up against it, nose to nose or nose to the wall, turns of line or phrase always running up against a new phrase, a new situation, a new sensation:

if I had a fancy sash  
 my own true love would  
 rent me out in earrings  
 but if I had a ribbon bow  
 in scratches and numbers  
 he'd read my mind, with hail  
 burning like a city's  
 frozen and vivid dead:  
 but my method is to fear him,  
 his scorched & wasted coins,  
 history's oppressive line,

my thighs  
my anarchic scales  
oh fucking tide<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on folk song, the 'Selected Resources' on page 79 identifying Karen Dalton's version of 'Ribbon Bow', the poem moves from a yearning-affect that knits together romantic or erotic love, the barriers to this that are put up by poverty and the specific pressure put upon heterosexual women to adorn themselves for the sake of male desire if their own desires are to be satisfied, to something still more problematic. The yearning for a 'true love' takes a turn into direct exploitation by the potential lover: prostitution. There are two constants running through these three lines: capitalism and patriarchy and the way they infect sexual or romantic desire through unequal power relations and material scarcity, and provide both motive and opportunity for exploitation. However, there is no privileged position from which to take a view on these things and see them clearly; rather, as I read the poem I am performing and embodying the sensations that compose these plaits of desires and social relations, which for the purposes of analysis need to be unpicked from within the cramped space of both thwarted and exploited potential.

Returning to 'Ribbon Bow' in the fourth line here, 'but if I had a ribbon bow', sets up a more radical turn in the poem, with combined affects and percepts of a certain violence and of abstraction, 'scratches and numbers', the latter associated with the irrational rationality of capitalism in which specificity and sensuous immediacy are distanced and even erased by the numbers of profit and loss. Again, there is no clear perspective on this as I am *here*, within this rational irrationality, the immediacy of pain and the abstraction of numbers and an apparent insanity of paranoia, 'in scratches and numbers/he'd read my mind'. Though of course, through the algorithms of Google, Amazon, Facebook and Apple, our minds are read daily through our purchases and consumptions, of a ribbon bow or of anything else, so that paranoia is not simply insane but is rather a clear understanding of the real situation.

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<sup>14</sup> Bonney, *The Commons*, p. 27.

The raising of sensuous immediacy and of a certain insanity, or perhaps a clarity of delirium, moves me on through the hail that does not originate with the exploitative pimp that is capital itself, but which is associated with him/it – a visionary hail that is sheer misery and horror, 'burning like a city's/frozen and vivid dead'. Sheer misery and horror, yet lines like this are among the poem's most forceful pleasures. A measure of such pleasure may be cathartic, however it is sourced primarily in the force of its sensual immediacy, the sensations of which it is composed, its visionary impact. Here the semantic indeterminacy produced through pairing 'burning' with 'frozen' is almost beside the point, it is the sheer sensational force of those terms, along with 'vivid', that, in their performance and embodiment in reading, heighten my response, inject intensity, produce pleasure. There is beauty in that power and in the overall image that is produced, whatever the horror, whatever the misery. This coexistence of seemingly incompatible affects is of great importance – the horror is of course important to the politics of the landscape I move through as I read, it is the landscape I am within and up against. As the same time, the beauty and the excitement of the aesthetic force of that image and of the sensations of which it is composed immediately not only suggest but, however briefly, produce an escape from that landscape through its concurrent transformation.

As a minor poetry carved out of cramped conditions and claiming no authority for itself, communist poetry ought to be defined, at least in part, negatively: it must not claim to speak for or to represent a working class or proletarian identity. This is because, if it does so, it will fall immediately into the trap of attempting to territorialize itself on the majoritarian – it will be, in effect, a call for the recognition on majoritarian terms of the humanity, the legal rights, or the interests of the working class. *The Commons* does not do this, although there is a sense in which it asserts the humanity of the proletariat precisely through the anger and the violence of its presentation, even while recognition of that humanity on majoritarian terms is beside the point, just as any assertion of the rights or interests of working class people is beside the point. This is because the existence of the working class is a logical result of the operations of capital and the existence of the working class

is always the existence of a class at the bottom of the social and economic pile. In other words, it is a necessary result of the social relations that capitalism needs in order to exist. The interests of the working class, beyond palliative measures, lie in not being working class.

The anarchist-syndicalist activist and commentator Joseph Kay defines communist politics as 'negative', as against the 'positive' politics of non-communist leftism. The latter is a *moral* politics of asserting the rights, dignity and humanity of the oppressed, an 'affirmation of oppressed subject positions'<sup>15</sup> within (even if against) capitalism; the former, on the other hand, is 'a politics of the dispossessed, a negative politics that must destroy both its adversary and itself in the course of its liberation'.<sup>16</sup> A communist, proletarian politics must destroy itself as well as its adversary precisely because its primary interest is not to *be* itself – not to be working class, not to be proletarian, which cannot exist beyond capitalism and which, as long as it does exist, must necessarily remain dispossessed because that is the very condition for its existence within capitalist relations. An attempt to represent that existence in a straightforward way would be an implicit call for its recognition by the majority, something that for the communist is irrelevant. A moral attention to the 'indignity' or the 'unfairness' of being working class would fail to address the real issue, which is the inevitability of that existence within capitalism, something that the majoritarian cannot genuinely address and remain majoritarian. *The Commons* is a cramped space within which something, an experience composed of sensation, akin to working class existence is produced but is not represented. As I read I am not given a view of working class or proletarian life, no mirror is held up. Rather I am plunged into a real experience that refers to and resembles that life. It is an experience that is utterly singular, unique – not least because it is a conjunction of me, a reader, with my entire, specific situation, and the text; and yet it is also utterly collective, produced through language, and through a resurfacing of archaic collective forms like the folk song.

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<sup>15</sup> Kay, Joseph, 'The politics of affirmation... or the politics of negation?', <http://libcom.org/blog/the-politics-affirmation-or-politics-negation-18112008>. Accessed 17.47, 31/07/2015.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Commons*, then, does not fix or valorize working class identity and it does not issue from a fixed or stable centre or subject – which is to say neither an individual nor a collective subject. There is a rapid and energetic shifting between statements, observations and imperatives, along with the use of song lyrics (both folk song and rock 'n' roll) that suggest a history and a collective experience, but which do not for all that necessarily add up to a simple identity. The poetry eschews the production of identity by refusing a simple coherence, a refusal that is managed through a non-subjectification. However, the poem is not simply a composition of statements, quotations, poetic phrases and images either. I wish to argue that it does seem to issue from an individual source, a 'speaker' perhaps, even a version of a lyric 'I'; but this individual is also a collective – and is not a subject with a definable identity.

Taking a section from Set 2 for example:

hello, o burnt frequency  
where my eyes were  
without a city wall  
I have been designing  
a new geography of delight  
clean & troubled, like  
a baby's cry –  
flap your knees apart  
my insipid drunks, my  
shuffling laws, inside  
the jerking melting bellies  
of detectives & diagrams  
such irritating spheres  
get up now, dead man<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bonney, *The Commons*, p. 39.

The first line of this section begins with an address: 'hello'. This simple greeting would certainly seem to issue from a speaker, a subject, a lyric 'I', and it is friendly, there is a friendliness-affect. However, there is an immediate discursive clash as the friendly, somewhat polite but demotic greeting runs into the conventionally poetic 'o'. While 'o' would seem to issue from the same subject, the individual speaker, it has another source – poetic tradition. The sense of a discursive clash arises because 'hello' does not have its source in that tradition but, generally speaking, in a broad recent-and-contemporary English-language sociability. The first two words of this section, then, draw on different collective sources of speech or discourse, different traditions, with different affects. These place the apparently individual speaker in two collectivities simultaneously while suggesting that they are, if not exactly incompatible, then perhaps inconsistent with each other – they wouldn't normally be expected to exist in the same discursive space.

There is, then, a division in the first line here, which can be located around the comma and the following space. However, the force of this division is also derived from the fact that it composes the production of an unexpected connection. This might suggest that the poem's speaker, as it is presented here, in this section of the poem, is not only collective but also consists of multiple collectivities.

The fragmentation and discursive clash has a deterritorializing affect on me as I read. Deterritorialization is of course a well-known term, and it is one I have used a number of times already, but is not always clearly understood. Deleuze and Guattari define it as follows: 'The function of deterritorialization: D is the movement by which "one" leaves the territory. It is the operation of the line of flight.'<sup>18</sup> Deterritorialization removes the safety of settled opinion, prejudice and conventional expectation. It is an encounter with irreducible difference and a provocation to difference – of experience, of thought, of perception, conduct, or feeling, or all of these at once. It is a consequence of a genuine event and, frequently, an affect in and of innovative poetries. In this case it is an affect that reveals, with great condensation and great speed, an individual's (in fact mine, insofar as I embody and actualize the poem as I read it)

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<sup>18</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 508.



investment in, production out of and utter inseparability from the collectivities, their histories and spaces that, it turns out, I am an individuated product and instance of.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari make the following statement:

There is a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance. We reserve the name *haecceity* for it. A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and be affected.<sup>19</sup>

An individual is always in movement in relation to its context; this is different from the bourgeois notion of the subject, because the latter is an image of a centre of its own universe – it might be affected, it might affect, but these are, according to most bourgeois ideologies of the subject, epiphenomenal to its essential nature, its own essential truth or reality. The haecceity, on the other hand, is an individual – perfect, lacking nothing – that is distinguished from other individuals only by that individuality, not by any essential central nature. An individual human being is not to be distinguished in this sense from, for example, a period of time – a season or an hour. Deleuze and Guattari go on to make it quite clear that human individuals are not a separate type of entity from haecceities – ‘that is what you are, you are nothing but that’<sup>20</sup> – and that the individuality of the haecceity is not in any way opposed to the collective:

You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, *a life* (regardless of its duration) – a climate, a wind, a fog, a swarm, a pack.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 261.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 262.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

It is perhaps the italicized phrase '*a life*' that is most revealing in this passage; an individual is not a self-contained thing, it is an assemblage and an *event*:

The street enters into composition with the horse, just as the dying rat enters into composition with the air, and the beast and the full moon enter into composition with each other [. . .] This should be read without a pause: the-animal-stalks-at-five-o'clock.<sup>22</sup>

The significance of all this for my current argument is simply that the individual proletarian is an assemblage and an event, *a life*, that is composed of, and with, the society, the economic structure and the collectives of which he or she is a part. He or she is a part of them; they are a part of him or her. She is her membership of the proletariat; the proletariat is what it is in part because of her membership of it. There is no opposition between the individual and the collective. The proletariat is itself an individuation as an event that becomes through the individuals that compose it who are themselves, along every trajectory, events and collective assemblages.

The deterritorialization-affect of the lines I have been examining is amplified by the phrase 'burnt frequency', although it does not simply extend the precise form of the affect already composed, but rather brings new elements to the composition. This phrase is a somewhat surreal percept in that it has no apparent or direct reference (in what way can a frequency – a radio or other wavelength – be burnt?) and yet *is* an image. It is an image that, for me, composes a violence-affect as an element of the broader deterritorialization-affect, one that is suggestive of violent damage done to communication.

The next line, 'where my eyes were' is ambiguous in terms of syntax and semantics in that it does not necessarily follow. The lack of punctuation means that it is unclear whether a frequency has been burnt 'where my eyes were' or whether there is a semantic break between the lines so that 'my eyes' were 'without a city wall' (the

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<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 262–263.

following line) or whether the frequency has been burnt 'where my eyes were' which was 'without a city wall'. This raises a question around the concepts of end-stopping and enjambment. Only one of the lines in this section of the poem is end-stopped, yet the lack of this feature does not necessarily mean that there is enjambment; lines do not necessarily or unambiguously flow one into the other. This is, of course, a case in point: the second line here could flow from the first line, or into the third line or the three lines could flow together. On the other hand, there is no compelling semantic reason why any of them should do so at all, other than, perhaps, the fact that lines two and three both make use of deixis.

The lines could be read such that 'within the burnt frequency my eyes were without a city wall', although this would divide 'without a city wall' from 'I have been designing'; however, this is a reading that would in turn render problematic a stronger syntactic and semantic connection between 'I have been designing' and 'a new geography of delight'.

All of this ambiguity feeds an overall and generalized deterritorializing affect; however this latter still needs to be characterized more precisely. The question is: who or what is being deterritorialized? Perhaps it is 'the speaker', as an individual unified subject, that is being deterritorialized. However, if, as I think, the actualized poem is a conjunction of text and reader, then for the duration of the reading-performance the poem is the reader is the speaker is the poem. Therefore a deterritorialization of the speaker is a deterritorialization of a reader – me, in this immediate case.

Underlying all of this is the constant problematic of the poetic speaker or lyric subject, which returns me to the questions of individualization and collectivity.

When a reader reads a poem, she or he performs that poem, even if the reading is silent and in private. This performance is not a purely mental operation but a somatic process, one that engages the entire living animal-in-a-situation that a reader is.<sup>23</sup> Further, performances of a poem are *actualizations*: a poem as a text, as words or other marks upon a page, *is* a poem, a *real* poem; but it is also a *virtual*

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<sup>23</sup> Clay, Jon (2010), *Sensation, Contemporary Poetry and Deleuze: Transformative Intensities*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 51–53.

poem. It is actualized in a reader's life and body when it is performed. During a reading-performance, the reader is the poem and the poem is the reader. Insofar as this is the case, any multiplicity of discourses that are elements of a poem's composition will be unified in a reader's body as elements of their life. Equally and conversely, 'individual' readers, when actualizing a multiplicity of discourses, are specifically deterritorialized as collectivities and multiplicities. Bonney's use, therefore, of a range of discourses in *The Commons* collectivizes readers whether or not that range is experienced as issuing from a singular point (an individual speaker or lyric subject who is also multiple by virtue of being social and collective, historically, spatially and geographically contextualized – a haecceity) or from a number, a multiplicity, of such singular points. To an extent, it seems as if it matters little whether multiple discourses seem to flow from a singular and individuated point or from multiple points as in either case they will be actualized in and through an individual reader's body and life, which will be collectivized and socialized in the process of the actualizing reading of the poem.<sup>24</sup> Of course, this statement is only addressing the broad significance of the process described; a reader will actualize and *experience* the poem differently if it is read as issuing from a singular source or if it is read as issuing from multiple sources.<sup>25</sup>

The poem and its readers are composed of, amongst other things, fractured combinations of language and discourse that is suggestive of a minoritarian figure insofar as it is both individuated and collective. This is suggested, in turn, by particular words and phrases across the whole poem, including the section partially examined here. One of these, for example, is the phrase 'without a city wall', which draws on public and popular language use in that it comes from a well-known Christian hymn, 'There Is A Green Hill Far Away'. This phrase has the force of an intrusion or an infection because it has no obvious contextual reason to be there at all – no other relevant

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<sup>24</sup> An individual's life is already, of course, collective and social; what the process described here is doing is making that explicit, *experienced and encountered* beyond and despite dominant ideas of discrete individualism, bourgeois subjectivity, promoted to the advantage of capitalism and its ruling class.

<sup>25</sup> Hopefully it is hardly worth making explicit that the word 'source' should only be taken as relative; no source is absolute or originary in a strong sense.

reference to religion, to hymns, to the historical context in which it was composed, etc. It suggests itself as a kind of found text, but one that is not so much chosen but rather that imposes itself through the force of its cultural familiarity. It is a phrase that connects a collectivity – on an unconscious level and with no obvious agency, but a collectivity all the same. This is also the case with the political slogans that the poem makes use of, such as 'slaughter the fascist BNP',<sup>26</sup> and also with the poem's use of 'o', which is an un-original, stock poetic element. Such words and phrases all connect a certain collectivity precisely through their un-originality, embraced by the poem, which refuses thereby to attempt to insist upon some pure originality that would be suggestive of a discrete and autonomous bourgeois subject. Any such attempt would be a gesture towards assimilation to major literature and to the majoritarian in principle. It is also consonant with the third characteristic of minor literature, according to Deleuze and Guattari, which is that 'in it everything takes of a collective value [. . .] there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation.'<sup>27</sup>

However, once again, this does not mean that the poem is simply or purely an expression of the collective; these un-original resources are combined with each other and with other uses of language and discourse in ways that are in fact highly original, suggesting something that is rather individual-collective, something that refuses, as with the Deleuze-Guattarian concept of the haecceity, the conventional opposition between individuality and collectivity.

This brings me back to my earlier notion of Bonney's poetry as being possessed of a 'cramped energy', and I am tempted to assign to each of these two words an aspect of *The Commons* in the light of my analyses here. The word 'cramped' might be assigned to that which is un-original, that which is collective, that which lacks agency; the word 'energy' might be assigned to the creativity and originality that are nonetheless fundamental to this poem.

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<sup>26</sup> Bonney, *The Commons*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, p. 17.

However, collectivity can be creative, can compose itself in original ways and thereby be productive of further originality, it can have a positive and vital agency – particularly when it is revolutionary. If it is cramped in the here and now, that is because of a specific historical, social and political circumstance. It also needs to be remembered that there is no necessary opposition between collectivity and individuality. 'Cramped energy' is a single designation and the particular energy that is produced through and composes *The Commons*, which is frequently angry, sarcastic, mocking, violent, negating the present, insisting through its very existence on an affirmation of a virtual something else, even composing and already actualizing that something else, would not exist in the form in which it does if it were other than cramped. The collective is cramped and the individual is cramped and the individual is creative and original and the collective is creative and original. All of these elements are distinguishable, but all of them are thoroughly mutually implicated, inseparable and form their own broader individuality that is also multiple and collective.

The agency presented in the poem, both individual and collective, is cramped because it is constrained, hampered and lacking opportunity for open productive activity. This is always the case, of course: I am constrained by my facticity, an element of which is my existence within a particular collectivity (even when I am utterly alone) outside of which I could not exist. However, proletarian agency is placed under particular constraint due to the extent to which, in a capitalist society and within capitalist social relations, agency and productivity are tied to capital and can often only take place with bourgeois approval and backing – except in very cramped conditions. In *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*, Kristin Ross makes the point that 'workers are those who are not allowed to transform the space/time allotted to them.'<sup>28</sup> Proletarians are to a large extent proletarians by virtue of the fact that, while they are producers, they cannot, for the most part, produce freely; indeed, they are not *allowed* to do so – they have to do what they are told, continuing to work within capitalist social relations. The world is transformed by workers under

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<sup>28</sup> Ross, Kristin (2008), *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. London and New York: Verso, p. 41.

the orders of their masters, other than what can be managed in their 'free' time and without capital. This being the case, the poem suggests itself as a proletarian, and therefore communist, poem through this sense of a constrained-but-potentially-revolutionary agency that is both individual and collective, that works through its constraints in a determined, angry, violent refusal of bourgeois social relations.

This is further suggested through the poetic structuring of line and line-length, the relative rarity of both end-stopping and enjambment and so forth. Specifically, the combination of short lines and the frequent ambiguous breaks and linkages between words, phrases and lines, compose, at least for my reading, a sense of being cramped and of having little room for maneuver. This cramped aspect of the poem, however, does not necessarily restrict the quantity of movement, but rather affects the quality of movement. In fact it *aids* the composition of a lot of movement in the poem; not an easy, flowing movement that might suggest openness and space but rather a rapid, violent movement that is itself suggestive of cramped space, block-ages, of forced changes of direction as a result of flows being dammed and stopped. Such movements might be experienced by readers, actualized and embodied by them, as experimental responses to nearly impossible constraints. Certainly, that is how they feel to me. Proletarian agency, in this poem, is experimental.

Experimental agency and affects of energy and violence, are also frequently composed out of signification. Returning to the same section, I will focus on the phrases that will now be emboldened:

hello, o **burnt frequency**  
 where my eyes were  
 without a city wall  
 I have been designing  
 a new geography of delight  
 clean & troubled, like  
**a baby's cry –**  
**flap your knees apart**

my insipid drunks, my  
 shuffling laws, inside  
 the **jerking melting bellies**  
 of detectives & diagrams  
 such **irritating spheres**  
**get up now, dead man**

I have already considered 'burnt frequency' at some length, so moving immediately along, a baby's cry is frequently highly energetic and even violent, usually expressive of a seemingly desperate need. The verb 'flap' is, as verbs often are almost by their nature, energetic in itself, although 'flap your knees apart' might suggest an indolence, possibly even a kind of indolent sexuality, that could well be actualised as a kind of passivity – a sensation that is reinforced in the following line by 'insipid'.<sup>29</sup> However, there is a force in the phrase that comes from the fact that it is an imperative. In fact, if the phrase is actualised as sexual, the imperative also becomes sexualised, and sexual imperatives tend to carry an aggressive charge that may approach, rather disturbingly, a suggestion of rape or sexual assault, or perhaps sexual game-playing of dominance and submission. But involving whom? The speaker, the authorities, capital? The sense of ownership implied by 'my' – 'my insipid drunks, my/shuffling laws' – certainly in turn suggests the state and/or capital, which after all lay claim to

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<sup>29</sup> The source of the line 'flap your knees apart' is worth noting, coming as it does from Rimbaud's 'My Little Lovelies':

Shining in private moonlight  
 Like round-eyed sores,  
 Flap your scabby knees apart,  
 My ugly whores! (Rimbaud, Arthur, Complete Works, trans. Paul Schmidt. New York, HarperPerennial, 2008, p. 84)

The allusion to Rimbaud is, of course, an allusion to a whole radical poetic tradition, even a communist tradition given Rimbaud's association with the Paris commune. An element of this is a certain politicised avant-gardism that Bonney's work is clearly part of, in which the style – angry, witty, frequently ugly but with moments of great beauty or sublimity that are presented with a kind of irony, suspicion or wariness – is as political as anything else in its defiance of the status quo.



the laws and to some extent at least to people, even people of limited utility such as those weakened by alcoholism.

'Jerking melting bellies' has a reflexive violent energy, which, along with its visceral corporeality, might be actualised as a kind of suffering or as a pleasure-response. There is real complexity, ambiguity and ambivalence here. Reflexivity suggests a kind of energetic passivity, but at the same time this is not a passive phrase – bellies are not jerked and melted but are jerking and melting and there is no sense of what the stimulus might be. There might be a suffering in response to violence or there might be an orgasmic pleasure. It is indeterminate; that *kind* of context is not present; rather there is a movement from the insipid drunks instructed to flap their knees apart to the 'shuffling laws', both of which are, syntactically, inside the bellies that belong to detectives (is Sherlock or Marlowe or Warshawski suffering the affects of gunshot wounds or of sexual ecstasy?). This 'inside/the [. . .] bellies' might also suggest the possibility of a sickness, a revolted throwing up. There is a build-up of indeterminacy, of an impossibility of semantic understanding here, such that a constellation of percept and affect becomes fully dominant, one that seems to involve a play of suffering and pleasure that is in any case both violent and energetic, though the source of the energy, and its object, is somewhat ambiguous. 'Irritating' is a kind of low-level energy that is also low-level suffering, while the final (in this section) 'get up' again has the energy of the fact that it is an imperative. A messianic, miraculous imperative – though one that is delivered in straightforward, demotic, common terms.

This might seem to almost encapsulate the broad nature of the energy composed and expressed across the whole poem. That is to say, its role is ambiguous insofar as it seems to express the nature of a proletarian existence within capitalist social relations – as a proletarian I will be attacked, deprived; I will be made to suffer within this system over which I have extremely limited control, very little room for maneuver, virtually none in fact. I am not allowed, on anything like my own terms, to transform my allotted space or time. Except, that is, by resisting; and this poem is an expression and composition of resistance and an example of the possibility of

resistance, an 'immanent movement against society'<sup>30</sup> as it is presently constituted, the only possible outcome of which is, from a proletarian perspective, either a collapse back into the suffering of oppression and exploitation or the revolutionary destruction of the constraints imposed upon me (and I am always another, others, all of us<sup>31</sup>) and the construction of a new social and economic order in which we all transform our space and time, that are not allotted to us because they are all of us.

As a composition and expression of this resistance, the cramped energy of the poem is not only suffering but is *also* pleasure, joy – the joy of being communist,<sup>32</sup> which is not only a joy of anticipating the future but a joy, beautiful though frequently angry, frequently violent, of refusing and resisting the present and, in the process, already constructing and designing that future, the new geography of delight, right now.

### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Kindle file, Chapter 12.

<sup>31</sup> In the 'Letter on Poetics' published as a coda to his *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (2011, London: Unkant Publishing), Bonney writes 'The "long systematic derangement of the senses", the "I is an other", he's [Rimbaud's] talking about the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity, yeh? That's clear, yeh?' (p. 64), then going on 'the "I" becomes an "other" as in the transformation of the individual into the collective when it all kicks off.' (ibid.)

<sup>32</sup> Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio (2000), *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, p. 413.

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