





Sean Bonney's Social Space

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This short piece focuses on the social spaces of Sean Bonney's work through reading the poetic spaces of Bonney's book *Baudelaire in English* (2008) alongside the physical and social spaces in which Bonney's poems were read and received in London 2010–13, including the Tavistock Hotel bar and a short-lived squat off Leicester Square, as well as the university strikes of 2019.

In 2011, Sean Bonney was invited to run a guest creative writing seminar, and a throwaway remark he made has stuck with me: 'I don't care about creative writing', Bonney declared: 'What I care about is destructive writing'. Ever since, I've wondered, periodically, what is destructive writing; what does it look like and what are its limits? Is the critique of creativity under capitalism wholesale or is any creativity salvageable? It's possible that Bonney had in mind Walter Benjamin's destructive character, who reduces all to rubble to create a way forward; but what kind of emotional, intellectual or political fallout might come of this, in destructive writing? I once asked Bonney if this was the designation of poet he preferred for himself: destructive? Or perhaps: experimental; avant-garde; late modernist; innovative; political; disruptive? He said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world: 'I'm a mainstream poet'. Bonney started out reading poems at punk gigs (Mark E. Smith was a consistent point of influence); and perhaps punk was the most recent popular art form that was also formally experimental - yet the destructive aesthetic of the form also entailed exclusions. There's a tension in these various positions that I want to excavate a little here, around ideas of destruction and creation, but also, relatedly, of difficulty and accessibility in Bonney's work, and one way I'd like to approach this is to think in terms of the spatial – social space and aesthetic space, and who gets let in or shut out of a structure, especially when that structure is partially destroyed or only shiftingly coherent. The metaphor will strain a little to incorporate spaces that are physical, psychical, political and linguistic, but I want to set some poems next to some memories to explore these themes, as I have encountered them, in Bonney and his work. The aim is to open out the way in which Bonney narrated a certain sense of writing in late capitalism, one that creates a space of destruction that is against capitalism and for everyone – but I also want to, more simply, celebrate his work, and set down a sense of how much it meant to me.

To stake out the ground, I'll include some fragments about Bonney when I knew him, in London 2010–13. This was the time of the coalition government and its austerities, the anti-cuts protests, the London riots, the student movement against tuition fees; potentialities seemed opened up, lots of people were mobilised by and for these struggles, and a sense of possibility amassed, fizzing through London's unrestful arteries – all subsequently crushed, of course. Sean Bonney was giving readings from *Baudelaire in English* (the second edition had just come out with Veer), writing *Happiness*, and starting the *Letters*. The difficulty and possibility held in this moment inheres in these poems.

I was never super close to Bonney, but I knew him at that time from seminar rooms, picket lines and poetry readings. And also from pubs. Cheap, unfashionable pubs and bars, and the cheapest and most unfashionable was Bonney's favourite – The Tavistock

Hotel Bar in Bloomsbury. It had an unfathomable card payment system and an interior that looked like the lounge bar of an art deco liner that had been out of commission for some time. After poetry events at Birkbeck (where Bonney had finished, and I was starting, a PhD), there were collective groans as Bonney announced: the Tavi. It was in this period that Bonney was writing and reading work that seemed to me to open up an idiosyncratic space for anyone that encountered it; it was work that was fundamentally political as much as it was fundamentally poetic — and the half-submerged spaces of London that he loved felt like a further, material manifestation of this approach. This, to give a poetic example, is from *Baudelaire in English*:

LE SOLEIL::: or town gasp/// the stike Crimes phantastike Crimes what my mouth holds)))))) under the ////// pavement language && slaughtering kincs:

Reading this piece involves clambering across its typographical debris and twisty syntax, only to be brought up short against a barricade. The experience of reading the poem sets in motion a rearranging of the spatial and a deranging of the senses that is in the service of liberatory struggle: language as barricade and slaughtering kings, enacted via 'the smelting | dissolution of spirit & sense'. The spatialisation of language expressed here recalls the urban space of Baudelaire's resistant lyric practice: Baudelaire's speaker 'stumbl[ed] on words as over paving stones', and Bonney inflects this here with Situationism's surreal slogan of possibility: 'under the pavement the beach'. Bonney's collection was originally published in 2008, not at the time of the student movement or the London riots, but in the midst of capital's demise and grotesque, spectacular resuscitation. Even, or especially, at this moment, these lyric pavement stones resonate with their future re-purposing as barricade – and the Baudelaire-Situationist reference becomes later reanimated by the upheavals of 2011. At the centre of the poem is: 'what my mouth holds', which must be language, but it's material here, rooted in the physical, both in material degradation and the possibility of its transformation; the opening 'gasp' also recalls the tear gas of May '68, through the poem's refractions of urban Paris (tracing its thread from Baudelaire to Nanterre). The spatialisation of the lyric is what transforms this poetic site of resistance into both material and map – both matter to chuck on the barricade and a condensed invocation of urban anti-capitalist activism.

But Bonney's work is never straightforwardly revolutionary propaganda – there's always something disconcerting that stalks the images, and this complexity is why his work is amongst the best political writing. Here, we're worried by those 'inna Coins' (which are also 'what my mouth holds'). These are presumably a Baudelairean legacy: for Benjamin, Baudelaire was the poet of the commodity, and Bonney's 'inner coins' imply the internal construction of the subject by capital. If we read these coins inscribed in the rolling dots of the poem's typography, they trouble the reader hovering above the slaughtered kings of the final line, reminding us that whatever resistances we trace, all our lyric subjects are still shadowed by capitalism's creations. (The troubling coincidences of coins and language crop up variously in Bonney's work, with their shared qualities of circulation, exchange and, even, representation.) The subject's construction is idiosyncratically inner ('inna'), as in internal to the individual psyche, but it's also physical, external (via 'Coins' in circulation and exchange, like language). And here the poem stages the central challenge of what the political lyric poem must mediate – internal and external structures; the individual and the communal – yet in doing so also communicates its fundamental possibility.

There is another central issue of revolutionary militancy that this poem stages, and this is around the complexities of access. This poem is an inaccessible work, intentionally so, with its interruptive grammatical rubble. It's a poem that invites us in only unevenly, and yet one that seeks to fight for our collective liberation. Perhaps analogously, live readings of revolutionary poems in the upstairs of pubs (as so many were then) were not held in accessible places. Yet paradoxically, in spite of the material harms of these exclusions, and while bearing them in mind, essentially what I want to say about Sean Bonney at that time in London around 2011 is that he nonetheless opened up a collective imaginative space, impossibly perhaps, that was also a material place of empathic resistance. A kind of anticapitalist Tavi to call home in a complicated but committed mode of poetic hospitality (hosted by Bonney, amongst a very imperfect assemblage of us all).

And there is another pub that makes me think of Bonney: it was a short-lived squat in central London, off Leicester Square, where he gave a paper and a small reading once. That evening, I remember, I'd spent quite some time trying to pick an outfit that looked nonchalant, and arrived nervous. I knocked on the imposing wooden pub door, it swung open, and there stood Sean Bonney in a black pork pie hat, fag between his teeth, grinning; as soon as we were in, he was telling us how great it was to smoke in a pub again. I remember the paisley carpet, the cigarette smoke, the bar's defunct beer taps, and the rickety back room that the poetry reading was in; beyond the big windows it was a deep black outside. Someone asked: what are the new forms of poetry for now, for London's struggles, in 2011? I don't remember Bonney's exact answer, but I know he thought that poetic form spread out into the places it was comfortable in. If

it was poetry that could be read on a picket line, or in a squat pub, that was part of the poem's form, its extended social form. If it was corporate poetry or wine bar poetry (is there such a thing?), that inhered in the poem's form too, fixed it like a sheet of plate glass. Social content, political context, was poetic form, in some fundamental and non-metaphorical way. I think this is what Bonney believed. And I think he's saying something similar here: 'Without mess and stains, static and interference, the poem is in danger of becoming an overly smooth surface fit only for the lobbies of office buildings and as illustrations/expensive gallery catalogues, that kinda bullshit'; the poem is in social space and is of it.3 In Bonney's work of this time there exists a difficulty that is necessary for its spaces of possibility to be housed.

After Bonney passed away, I — like many others — read his work on the picket lines at the university strikes of that winter in 2019. I read from *Baudelaire in English* (it's my favourite collection; I'd written my MA dissertation on it, which I was too shy to ever admit to Bonney but I had the vague sense he knew): I read from the original, trying to use the mad score of the colliding typewritten graphics to kick start the same gear shifts, odd gaps and plosives of Bonney's readings — but getting nowhere near. Bonney's readings were astonishing halting furies: I don't think any of us have seen a performer like him. I think of him voicing these three words: 'commodity mystery absurdity' with an intensely physical performativity; or reading his Fuck The Police poem ('ACAB: A Nursery Rhyme') upstairs in another pub; it was a galvanising, collectivising anthem of political resistance.

At the strike, I made a sign with a quote on from another of Bonney's pieces, written in caps on the back of a cardboard box, by way of a makeshift memorial. I'd hoped to select a quote that summarised Bonney's generous resistances, only to return to the poems and find them too multifaceted, always escaping settled pithy sloganeering easiness. I eventually went with this:

Great love, that will crush the human world, I wish we could do something to help each other.

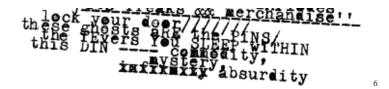
Until recently, I'd forgotten the words of this quote, but I remembered something of its form, the timbre of its cadences and the shape of the words on the sign propped up against the university's iron railings. And I remember the feeling of it: reaching out for something hopeful, but really actually unbearably sad. It appeared on Bonney's blog and then in *Our Death*, and it continues:

But today we are separated by so many tedious enemies. They smile at us all day long and ask us about our fever. What is there to say? That "fever", in the way they pronounce it, isn't much more than a weird reflection of their smile, which in itself

is a symbol of their sense of rightness within the so-called world. But that we feel that the five characters that make up the word "fever" – or indeed the word "smile" – are actually indicative of the illusory nature of the ownership of their senses, or of their history, which from another angle simply means the deleted histories of the cities of the sun and the devastation that continues to be inflicted there. [...] Great love, we cannot read the language written there.⁴

Those five cyphers that we read differently, the illusory ownership of the senses, and the deleted histories of the cities of the sun (with its echo of 'LE SOLEIL:::: or town gASP ////'), these all contribute to the constellating symbolism Bonney developed throughout his poetics. The passage resituates Marx's statement that '[t]he forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present', echoed here in the illusory ownership of the senses alongside the five characters of 'fever'.5 There's characteristic Bonney-logic at work in this passage: re-reading the social façades of the characters of capitalism (who perhaps correspond with the 'social hieroglyphic' of the commodity) excavates histories of oppression from the layers of so-called city life. This re-reading militates against the ways in which we are prevented from knowing the world as it is because of the social production of value under capital. It models a hallucinatory, exhumatory, social, truth-seeking practice of re-reading, and yet: 'Great love, we cannot read the language written there'. The politics escapes into the lyric, and returns. Bonney's images are never straightforward, they move and twist and in doing so enact a radical suspension of both the lyric and the political into a kind of lemniscate of the social. Bonney understood that dialectics is poetics, and his commitment to mapping the full weird complexity of this, to articulating or (in a more Bonney-ish term) *mouthing* it, is unmatched.

The image of fever recurs throughout Bonney's oeuvre, also often as a metonym for false consciousness. In this, from *Baudelaire in English* again, the fever becomes further entangled with social and psychical space:



Here, the privacy behind the locked door is opened out by the poem to reveal itself as an extension of the commodity fetish. Even the dream, the internal workings of the psyche at rest, becomes an absurd fever that seems to emanate from the contagious

din of the commodity. The ghosts, which might signify dead labour, become pins, which are presumably hidden in the lock's mechanism; all concealed like the secret 'infirmity' of the final line (for years I read this as hidden 'infinity').7 In a poem where the dream takes on the commodity form, turning our inner desires into work, the submerged structure of the absurdity of commodity and property is mapped, made visible, as a mode of resistance. The chiming internal- and end-rhyme feels like the sonic equivalent to the typographical static, as the poem's movement on the page enacts its restless fever dream and attempts to escape it. This fever is the delirium of capitalist culture that shapes the poem as much as its urban setting (the poem begins with 'City formaldehyde' where 'mysteries leak like a burst fridge or shop's blood [...] The sales are on'). If, as for Benjamin, Baudelaire spoke in the voice of commodity, then Bonney's revisionings speak from deep within the absurdity of the city and psyche that are damaged by their organisation around the 'mysterious thing' of the commodity.8 Yet even in this fetishistic terrain, the poem still clings to some vestiges of the barricades (as cyphers of defiance): we can perceive the system's hidden infirmity, and its correlate secret potential of infinity, all while we are liberally handed abundant forward slashes and dashes – surely with which to unpick those locks.

From the malevolent broadcasts of Happiness, the doors and locks of London, 'that bored bank manager' in Baudelaire in English, to the 'deleted histories of the cities of the sun', Bonney's city isn't just a symbol of social space but is fundamental to mapping the material dialectics of its potentiality for revolution.9 I began to think of Bonney's inhabiting of unfashionable London as a kind of anti-flâneuring, after the figure of the flâneur had been so thoroughly recuperated. Bonney's poor, precarious, always marginal London existed against a hyper-mobile consumer, and felt nothing but disdain for the window shopper casually consuming their own consumption, enjoying the leisure of buying back fragments of the lives they'd willingly sold (their own and others). Bonney once told me that his favorite place in London was the Greenwich foot tunnel. It's a place of drippy dilapidation, simultaneously hilariously run down and terrifyingly leaky, but strikingly alien to the corporate shininess of Canary Wharf on one side and the chichi bourgeois picturesqueness of Greenwich on the other. Bonney claimed he'd once done a reading there, which seems the ideal crucible for the poetic transformations of one of Bonney's readings: an abject submerged place, a place to re-sense the entire history of the world.

I think what I'm getting at is that there's something unusual and crucial about social space in Bonney's work, something that invites you in, almost physically, in a way that is generous, but still resistant. There wasn't a password to cross the threshold, you didn't have to know the right Adorno quote or have read the whole of Benjamin's

Arcades (which frankly to enter other places you did), but you had to get that poverty is an outrage, that inequality is too, that capitalism is systematic immiseration, and if you got that, the door would hinge open. Bonney wrote something similar about Anna Mendelssohn's poetics ('In the face of those who would have "silenced" her, the response is to speak a language to which they have no access'), but her opacities always seemed to me more barbed than his. Donney wasn't exclusionary, was never policing the barricades like some of his compatriots; maybe that's why he could realistically consider himself a mainstream poet.

Bonney's essay at the end of *Baudelaire in English* is one I've been intrigued by for years. In it, he writes about breaking into a dilapidated building slated for demolition set back from Dalston Lane. I vaguely remember this building: it was a big dark brown brick terrace, tall and shabby, on the main road and skirted by hoardings for years (inevitably there are yuppie flats there now). In the essay, Bonney clambers in with a disposable flash camera and spins out a metaphor:

I scrambled into the building through a hole in the wall, on impulse, & inside it was absolutely dark apart from a few cracks of light coming through gaps in the wooden boards where the windows had been. When I tried to take photos, the flash illuminated the whole interior, giving me a set of well-lit photos of a place nobody could actually see. [...]

---- The photos were interesting to me because they were of the 'invisible', both in terms of being rooms I couldn't see, and of being of an asocial, abandoned space in the inner city [...] the 'invisible' is not some other-worldly visionary realm, it is just these abject spots/these gaps in the safely constructed social text, tenuously analogous to 'poems', where nothing 'useful' can happen[.]¹¹

This is a blueprint for Bonney's poetic theory: the poem as the momentary illumination of the hidden, as making visible the submerged potential of the structures we live in. It's imagined in spatial terms that play on the etymology of stanza as room and the idea of the city as (social) text. In the same essay he adds: '[L]isten, it's just plain dishonest to have one room with political poems in it, another with love poems and so on' – the abstraction of these elements imagined as separate rooms in the bourgeois household, analogising the false abstraction of the state and the personal life in modernity (as Kristin Ross explicates). Bonney's analogy is multiple, as it also aims at the literal re-organisation of the city, the removal of (representative) power from the administrative bourgeois interior to the semi-open marginality of the abandoned. Bonney's scrabbling into a condemned building can be read as a gesture of *détournement* (the essay is littered with

Situationist-adjacent ideas). Here is Ross again: 'Détournement is no mere Surrealist or arbitrary juxtaposition of conflicting codes; its aim, at once serious and ludic, is to strip false meaning or value from the original'.¹³ We see the seriousness of this play in Bonney's slippage between police power and lyric power in another of his essays on poetics: 'I'd like to write a poetry that could [...] make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism, where the lyric I – yeh, that thing – can be (1) an interrupter and (2) a collective'.¹⁴ The abandoned building is another interruptive, semi-open space that metaphorises the lyric: this condemned interior as a lyric interior, a subjectivity in language that is both inward and outward, a well-lit place nobody can actually see.

I never spoke to Bonney about Kristin Ross' work, but he was surely influenced by her book on Rimbaud and the Paris Commune, which acts for me as a kind of shadow theoretical text to some of Bonney's poetics of this period. I return to my copy and find the following passages (although almost every page of the chapters on space feel apposite). Here, Ross is explicating the symbolic implications of the makeshift barricades of the Paris Commune that incorporated bits of street detritus, doors torn off their hinges, paving stones, and other abandoned furniture:

Monumental ideals of formal perfection, duration or immortality, quality of material and integrity of design are replaced by a special kind of *bricolage* – the wrenching of everyday objects from their habitual context to be used in a radically different way [...] the creation, through destruction, of a positive social void, the refusal of the dominant organisation of social space [...] The failure of the Communards in the "mature" realm of military and politico–economic efficacy is balanced by their accomplishments in the Imaginary or preconscious space that lies outside specific and directly representable class function – the space that could be said to constitute the realm of political desire rather than need.¹⁵

Bonney's linguistic barricades take a similar approach in their incorporation of abandoned urban objects and spaces, and his revolutionary utopianism traces a site of political desire.

Ross comments that in the poetry of Rimbaud, 'the libidinal and the political are one'.¹6 For Ross reading Rimbaud, the mundane junk of libidinal energy is repurposed as political in the lyric poem in a way that is analogous to everyday furniture's transmogrification into street barricade — and this too could equally apply to Bonney's work. The derelict building essay, for example, goes on to incorporate some severe libidinal excess: a feverish skit featuring Bruce Willis as masturbatory fantasy culminates in the speaker having '[r]eturned to the basement and wanked hard [...] [s]hot load and puked for three

hours'; elsewhere our speaker promises: I'll '[f]uck you like a running tap'.¹⁷ This excess functions to index materially the intensity of political desire, but it does something more too, it introduces an insistent remainder. It might sound implausible, but to me there's a careful attention at work in the way Bonney represents his speaker's abjections - a mode of respect in making the discomforting vulnerability of these politically-committed subjects visible. Perhaps there's a realism about it that I'm drawn to too: the scars and secrets of the dereliction of the psyche. Bonney's utopianism was constellated with a realism that occasionally teetered towards nihilism (and sometimes a kind of posturing, that never descended into the macho but occasionally felt worryingly proximal). Yet it remains integral to the politics to balance revolutionary imaginings with the static of everyday immiseration: such moments of vulnerability ground the poems, and also enable the lyric to resist reification into agitprop. The disintegrating libidinal economy of Baudelaire in English is expressed in the architecture of the crumbling building: its basements and its running taps, alongside the ruins of poetic stanzas that make up the poems themselves. The crumbling abjection of the psyche plays the same role in the poetic theory as the abandoned building, both are spaces of potentiality – and the poetry must make visible both for its urban, bodily, material dialectics to sing.

I want to leave you with one of Bonney's poems that I love best, and I'll pass it to you for you to find your own place within its stars and secret rooms:

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PAYSAGE::::

I*II tenty a biece of sky trologer

&& tha car-alarms are wedding screech,;

Dig it/// I stand just here windowed

the city syndrome the awesome bucking SKY --

its kinda pretty & Secret Reems

its kinda pretty & Frivers()/

Iinside this hundre true awesome bucking sky --

its kinda pretty & Secret Reems

will be at the huntry seasons // drinking

will be at my selfenst revolute is by arinking

will be at my selfenst revolute is breing yelp

& kisses shudder. I wint pretty is breing yelp

whom will not pause, but split

my names are wet hair www.

y cabularly, this barely setting air.
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It's become customary to address a lost poet with: see you on the other side. If there is a revolutionary communist underworld, I imagine Sean Bonney swinging open the door, fag in mouth, pork-pie hat on head, opening out for us the possibilities of this world's dereliction, inviting us to learn to re-sense and to re-read the great love of the language written there.

Notes

¹ Sean Bonney, Baudelaire in English (London: Veer, 2011), p. 27. Here is a transliteration:

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or town gASP ////
thes
phantastik CriMES
FLARE
inna Coins &
what my mouth holds )))))))
under the
pavement ----//////------
language
as barricade ::::
&& slaughtering KinGS
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- ² Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 50.
- ³ Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 90.
- ⁴ Sean Bonney, 'Abject 2 (After Baudelaire)', http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2017/05/our-death-35-abject-2-after-baudelaire.html [Accessed 27 February 2022]. A version also appears in *Our Death* (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2019), pp. 105–06.
- ⁵ Karl Marx, 'Private Property and Communism', *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/comm.htm [Accessed 27 February 2022].
- ⁶ Bonney, 'Les Sept Viellards', Baudelaire in English, p. 30. Here is a transcript:

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lock your door //////
these ghosts aRE the PINS /
the fEvers You SLEEP wITHIN
this DIN ---- commodity,
mystery,
absurdity
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- ⁷ The dead labour of Adam Smith's pin factory may be another ghost submerged in this image. Smith used the pin factory to exemplify the division of labour, an image of which then ended up adorning the twenty pound note in a weirdly demystifying representation, as the mechanism of the extraction of capitalist value becomes hidden in plain sight (and Frances Kruk would later spin out the image of the twenty pound note's factory in her sequence *PIN* (London: yt communication, 2014)).
- ⁸ 'A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing' Marx writes in 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof', *Capital Volume 1* https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4 [Accessed 27 February 2022].
- ⁹ Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 60.
- ¹⁰ Sean Bonney, "Minds do exist to agitate and provoke/this is the reason I do not conform" Anna Mendelssohn', *Poetry Project Newsletter* 226 (2011), pp. 17–19 (p. 19).

- ¹¹ Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 88; p. 86.
- ¹² Kristin Ross, The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (London: Verso, 2008), p. 23. Ross writes, for example: 'The abstraction of the state belongs to modernity, because the abstraction of private life an apolitical, civil sphere organized around particular, individual interests belongs only to modernity'.
- ¹³ Ross, p. 42.
- ¹⁴ Sean Bonney, *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant, 2011), p. 65.
- ¹⁵ Ross, p. 36; p 39.
- ¹⁶ Ross, p. 33.
- ¹⁷ Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 87; p. 35.
- ¹⁸ Bonney, Baudelaire in English, p. 32.

Competing Interests

The author serves as Reviews Editor of the Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry.