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Notes on Militant Poetics

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Notes on Militant Poetics 1/3



'There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity when an authentic upheaval can be born . . . (a) descent into a real hell' (Fanon).

'Truth content becomes negative. [Poems] imitate a language beneath the help-
less language of human beings: it is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars'
(Adorno).

The Situationists called poetry the 'anti-matter of consumer society', a fairly questionable claim, but one that is at least expressive of the chasm that operates between official reality's definitions of poetry and those of whatever still remains of the revolutionary avant-garde. 'Mainstream' poetry is irrelevant: the Situs knew the

real poetry of capital was advertising. Advertising, the corporate avant-garde, is the anti-matter of everyday life. Poetry, meanwhile, has become entirely invisible – or rather, it only exists in weird states of high and necessary intensity, in zones of absolute negation. And so it would stay, if it were not true that advertising is itself becoming fluent in what was always poetry’s esoteric specialty, i.e. the language of the dead. The empty billboards that are becoming more and more common throughout East London (and everywhere else) speak more eloquently about the collapse of capital into sterile and arid zones of its own making than any poetry. Advertising, and the utopia it expresses, is now the anti-matter of itself. Anyway, perhaps we should shut up about the Situationists – as the saying goes, FORGET MAY 68, FIGHT NOW. Though it’s clear that advertising, like poetry, has its origins in the curse, the charm, and the spell. The supposed spells of the Welsh bards, all those secret combinations of words that had the power to kill kings – those fantasies have become all too real in their transformation into the secret combination of words that have the power to make you want to kill the poor. And as the whole shit-house goes up in flames, only an idiot would fail to see that the truth content of the spells of advertising’s poetry are the sentences spoken by judges. Advertising was only ever the glamour cast over the real poetry of capital, the arid realities of the prison sentence and the police bullet.

Notes on Militant Poetics 2/3



I have completely repressed all emotion; have learned to see myself in perspective, in true relation with other men [sic] and the world. I have enlarged my vision so that I may be able to think on a basis encompassing not just myself, my family, my neighbourhood, but the world. I have completely arrested the susceptibility to think in theoretical terms, or give credence to religious, supernatural, or other shallow unnecessary things of this nature that lock the mind and hinder thinking.

This, from the earliest letter in George Jackson's *Soldedad Brother*, might be read as the negative expression of the famous statements in Rimbaud's letters of May 1871. Where Rimbaud proposed an expansion of vision whose negation of privatised consciousness would permit entry into a transformative collective that would challenge and ultimately shatter the constrained possibilities of bourgeois consciousness—as usual, Jackson's expansion of consciousness is made necessary and also possible through a maximum tightening of those same constraints. Jackson writes from solitary confinement, where the almost total annihilation of his subjectivity forces an expansion of 'vision' so that it includes 'not just' himself and the 'family' and 'neighbourhood' that he is separated from (ie the content of a denied memory) but also 'the world', a 'world' that Jackson believes he can see with absolute clarity because through his enforced separation from it he is able to reject the 'unnecessary things' that define and 'lock' it. Whereas Rimbaud believes he can achieve clarity through a flight from bourgeois constraints, Jackson is forced into that clarity by the very impossibility of that flight. But more than Rimbaud, Jackson's early letters resemble the writing of the revolutionary psychopath Sergey Nechayev, whose 1869 *Catechism of a Revolutionist* was reprinted by the Black Panthers in 1969:

The revolutionist is a person doomed. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and passion for revolution . . . The revolutionist knows that in the very depths of his being, not only in words but in deeds, he has broken all the bonds which tie him to the civil order and the civilized world with all its laws, moralities and customs, and with all its generally accepted conventions. He is their implacable enemy, and if he continues to live with them it is only in order to destroy them more speedily.

Where Rimbaud also wishes to liberate himself from the 'laws, moralities and customs' of the bourgeois civil order, Nechayev refuses the ecstasy of that liberation and bolts himself to the cruel centre of that same order. In seeking to express through his person the absolute negation of everyday reality, Nechayev becomes the personification of its basic banality and brutality. The 'passion for revolution' into which Nechayev

must eradicate his being is only the negative expression of the 'passion' for money to which any bourgeois will ecstatically sacrifice their person. Jackson is forced into a more radical position than either Rimbaud or Nechayev precisely because of the forced eradication of that passion. Jean Genet, in his introduction to Jackson's book, claims that the arid zone this necessary (self-preserving) refusal of passion gives access to is the place from which a new, militant poetics can emerge. Genet says of the writings of Jackson, and of the writings of other imprisoned black militants:

(T)heir voices are starker, more accusing and implacable, tearing out every reference to the cynical conjuring of the religious enterprise and its efforts to take over. They are more singular, and singular too in the way they all seem to engage a movement that converts the old discourses, in order to denounce the curse not of being black, but of being captive.

Genet insists that Jackson's letters be read as 'poetry': his use of the word, like that of the Situationists, is symptomatic of a crisis in the artform – a crisis expressed most forcefully in the fact that it remained an artform – that in part arose from the failure of Surrealism to achieve their much advertised synthesis of Marx and Rimbaud. It is an understanding of the possibilities of poetry that sounds almost hopelessly utopian now. The writings of Genet, the Situationists and Jackson, even given the pitches of rage and icy violence each of them reached, are soaked in revolutionary optimism. Victory, as far as all of these writers were concerned, was inevitable. From the standpoint of our own apocalypse such optimism reads, at best, bitterly. But maybe an icy bitterness is just what we need. The violent austerity of Jackson's writing, and thus Genet's claims for it, may have managed to smuggle some of that revolutionary charge into our own historical position. The austerity of the language means that everything must be laid bare. Genet notes that in order for his letters to get past the prison censor, Jackson must conceal all of his passion within a language in which the only permitted emotion is hatred. Poetry, the 'slandered, the reprobate words . . . the words that don't belong in the dictionary' becomes so much contraband. Forced to speak the language of the captor, the captive is only permitted to speak in a way that is absolutely comprehensible to that captor. All of the many things the word 'poetry' is supposed to mean begin to buckle and come apart under this kind of pressure. Genet elsewhere speaks scornfully of the well-made poem or artwork: 'the closer a work of art is to perfection, the more it is enclosed within itself'. That aesthetic enclosure is, obviously, the counter-prison. The reactionary esotericism of remarks such as George Steiner's 'Celan's poems take us beyond what we already know', or Mario Vargas Llosa's 'we remain in the dark, unable to penetrate that mysterious aureole that we feel to be the secret of (Vallejo's) poetry's originality and power' conceals the social pain, hunger and rage contained in that poetry. Anyone

who has suffered the gross humiliation of being left out of the 'perfection' of bourgeois reality knows all too well what that 'beyond', what that 'secret' is, and they know it because they are it. Contemptuous of a poetics that is only ever an aesthetic parody of the commodity form, Genet implies that we need to think in terms of a poetry that can be somehow prior to itself, and can thus force that 'secret' into the raw light of day.

Notes on Militant Poetics 2.5/3



There, too, are crossroads where ghostly signals flash from the traffic, and inconceivable analogies and connections between events are the order of the day. It is the region from which the lyric poetry of Surrealism reports. And this must be noted if only to counter the obligatory misunderstanding of *l'art pour l'art*. For art's sake was scarcely ever to be taken literally; it was almost always a flag under which sailed a cargo that could not be declared because it still lacked a name. This is the moment to embark on a work that would illuminate as has no other the crisis of the arts that we are witnessing: a history of esoteric poetry.

Walter Benjamin believed the most hermetic poetry had a latent content, a secret that in being actually spoken could negate the secret of the commodity. He drew a compelling analogy between Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Dostoyevsky, and the 'infernal machines' of the 19th century anarchist terrorists. Mallarmé did the same. It doesn't quite work: the nihilism of Nechayev, or the anarchism of Bakunin, is ambiguous to say the least. The content of Rimbaud's flight from poetry – ie the realisation of that poetry – was a flight into the silence of colonialism, free trade and capitalist vampirism. If esoteric poetry is

potentially the unspoken expression of the destruction of capitalism, then it is just as potentially the unspoken expression of the fascism that is always lurking at capital's centre. Thus, André Breton's insistence on the need to work out a combination of the insights of Rimbaud and Marx continues to be one of the most important ideas in the history of modernist poetics. It has yet to be satisfactorily achieved. Breton's fetishisation of poetry prevented him from understanding that its latent content could only be realised through a dialectic of poetry and Marxism, and not the merely complementary relationship he envisioned. That this dialectic risked the destruction of poetry as poetry was more than Breton could bear. Likewise, the Situationist realisation of poetry, as a *détournement* of the Marxist realisation of philosophy, was a vital moment whose chance, so far, has been missed. It is because of this failure that the political essays Jean Genet wrote between the late 60s and his death in the early 80s, and in particular the series on George Jackson, may be the most suggestive and important essays on militant poetics for our own period. They have still not been sufficiently understood. No idealist, Genet knew, more than anyone since Benjamin, the basic ambiguity of extremist modernism. The dialectic of radical poetry meant it was also realised in the brutality of capital itself. The George Jackson cycle sets up a fight to the death between the sentences spoken by the judge, and the sentences Jackson wrote in solitary confinement. The prosody of capital's domination is inherent in every syllable the judge utters. His sentence freezes the time of the captive, who now has to live within that sentence for months, years, a lifetime. Insofar as that lifetime is virtually erased, the judge's sentence also travels back in time, taking possession of every second the captive has lived through. Genet wants to believe that every sentence Jackson writes, from within his forced invisibility, negates the judge's prosody: for Genet, Jackson's writing realises a counter-time which is necessarily revolutionary. This only sounds idealistic. Jackson's revolutionary writing can, for Genet, be called 'poetic' without belittling either Jackson's militancy, or indeed poetry, only within the context of Genet's Blakean claim 'that the revolutionary enterprise . . . of a people originates in their poetic genius, or more precisely, that this enterprise is the inevitable conclusion of poetic genius'. This cuts both ways: if it is true, then the judge is the conclusion of the poetic genius of the bourgeoisie. The many levels on which the class struggle has to be fought includes a realised poetics. For Jackson, the 'poetic genius' of the African-American people has only ever been 'the theory that we are good for nothing but to serve or entertain our captors':

Love has never turned aside the boot, blade or bullet. Neither has it ever satisfied my hunger of body or mind. The author of my hunger, the architect of the circumstantial pressures which are the sole cause of my ills will find no peace, in this existence or the next, or the one following that; never, never. I'll dog his trail to infinity. I hope I never will feel love for the thing that causes insufferable pain.

The 'hellhound on my trail' of ancient blues mythology, which Jackson has no use for, is reversed. Jackson's language is what remains after the record stops. Traditional poetic impulse is transformed within the high temporal compression of the cell into tense clarity, pure content which, in its turn, transforms into intent:

One of those tall ultrabright electrical fixtures used to illuminate the walls and surrounding area at night casts a direct beam of light into my cell at night. (I moved to a different cell last week). Consequently I have enough light, even after the usual twelve o'clock lights out, to read or study by. I don't really have to sleep now if I choose not to. The early hours of the morning are the only time of the day that one can find any respite from the pandemonium caused by these the most uncultured of San Quentin inmates. I don't let the noise bother me even in the evenings when it rises to maddening intensity, because I try to understand my surroundings.

Notes on Militant Poetics 2.9/3



One of those tall ultrabright electrical fixtures used to illuminate the walls and surrounding area at night casts a direct beam of light into my cell at night. (I moved to a different cell last week). Consequently I have enough light, even after the usual twelve o'clock lights out, to read or study by. I don't really have to sleep now if I choose not to. The early hours of the morning are the only time of day that one can find any respite from the pandemonium caused by these most uncultured of San Quentin inmates. I don't let the noise bother me even in the evenings when it rises to maddening intensity, because I try to understand my surroundings.

George Jackson works to understand the truth content of his invisibility – the cell as the defining molecule of the official world, which, to quote Marcuse quoting Hegel, is ‘a strange world governed by inexorable laws, a dead world in which human life is frustrated’. Or rather, a dead world in which Jackson has suddenly come to life, and now must gauge what is comprehensible and alive within its noise and maddening intensity. From his cell in San Quentin, Jackson is writing from the centre of the position that some of the greatest moments in western poetry have only ever been reaching towards, and it is through this awareness that we can begin to understand what Genet might mean by insisting on his sense that Jackson’s writing is poetry. It is telling that Jackson calls the prison world Pandemonium, for Milton talks about the same impossible situation. When, in the tenth book of *Paradise Lost*, Satan and the rest of Pandemonium’s citizenry are transformed into serpents that transformation is registered primarily by the loss of language, communication and thought: ‘dreadful was the din / of hissing through the hall, thick swarming now with complicated monsters’ – the rebel angels are forced into a ‘maddening intensity’ of noise, where thought and speech become impossible. Attempts to deal with the necessities of speech and cognition from within a place where they are made impossible is a defining theme throughout revolutionary poetics, from Milton through Blake and Shelley, and via Marx into the radical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Blake’s Urizen, in *The Four Zoas*, tries to but cannot communicate with the ‘horrid shapes and sights of torment’ he sees within the Abyss – ie prison, factory, slum – because his language, whether ‘soothing’ or ‘furious’, is ‘but an inarticulate thunder’. Shelley’s poetry is full of a sense of a liberated language which comes from a place so distanced from the official world that it can barely, if at all, be heard: in *The Revolt of Islam* the spirit of Liberty speaks in a ‘strange melody / that might not belong on earth’, while in *Prometheus Unbound* we are told that we cannot speak at all if we cannot already speak ‘the language of the dead’. That language of the dead is, in Marxist terms, the voice of dead labour, capital itself. Most contemporary poetry, both ‘avant-garde’ and ‘mainstream’, is allergic to those voices, and would like to pretend that poetic time lives separately to the dominant time of capitalism. It isn’t true. Poetry has to pretend it can’t communicate ‘ideas’ because the cargo it carries – to once again use Benjamin’s metaphor – is the collective voice of the victims of those ideas. The carefully put together exercises that pass themselves off as poems can only ever be polite facsimiles of the exterior of cells like that of George Jackson, but it can only ever be the flaws and cracks in the surface that really speak. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), in 1964, his own poetry beginning to crack apart under the pressure of the increasingly obvious contradictions between his aesthetic and political commitments, wrote that ‘poetry aims at difficult meanings. Meanings not already

catered to'. Poetry doesn't talk about the world, nor does it create meaning, but rather aims at meanings not yet articulated, meanings not catered to in the currently available aesthetic and social networks. This pushes poetry to a critical edge-condition which risks its destruction as poetry in a way that is far more serious than any silly corporate nihilism claiming to have 'killed' 'poetry'. Meanings are communicated which risk tearing the poem apart. Édouard Glissant describes this same process, taken out of the framework of the history of poetry and into actually lived time:

Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how the dispossessed organised their speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of pure noise.

The organisation of speech provokes the communication of meanings that had previously been impossible: it goes without saying that this organisation has yet to be achieved. The poetics of the enemy has not ceased to be victorious, its own 'meaningless texture of pure noise' all too readily comprehensible. On August 21 1971, three days before his trial was due to begin, George Jackson was shot dead by a prison guard. If the internal secret of bourgeois poetics is the voice of the oppressed and dispossessed, its silencing perimeter is the bullet of a cop.

Notes on Militant Poetics 3/3



As for the political thought of the Black Panthers, I am convinced it originates in the poetic thought of Black Americans We are realising more and more that a poetic emotion lies at the origin of revolutionary thought – Genet

This antagonist is still maintaining his incognito, and he resides like a needy pretender in the cellars of official society, in those catacombs where, amidst death and decomposition, the new life germinates and blossoms – Heine

The songs I heard there seemed to have been composed in hell and the refrains rang with furious anger. The demonic tones making up those songs can hardly be heard in our delicate spheres, until heard with one's own ears in the huge metal workshops where half-naked figures illumined by angry sparks from the forge sing them with a sulky, defiant air, beating the time with their iron hammers: the boom of the anvil makes for a most effective accompaniment to the scene of passion and flames – Heine

Accordingly, the dialectic image should not be transferred into consciousness as a dream, but in its dialectical construction the dream should be externalised and the immanence of consciousness itself be understood as a constellation of reality – the astronomical phase, as it were, in which Hell wanders through mankind. It seems to me that only a map of such a journey through the stars could offer a clear view of history as prehistory – Adorno

The revolutionary kernel of the poetry fetish becomes clear if George Jackson's letters are read simultaneously with Lautréamont. In a 1943 essay on Lautréamont, Aimé Césaire wrote that 'by means of the image we reach the infinite'. This 'infinite' is no bourgeois escape route through which the poetry fan can reach a gated community of cosmic harmony: when Lautréamont sneers that his pen has made a boring Paris street like Rue Vivienne 'mysterious' he means the poetic image has been transformed into a splinter of glass fixed into the centre of your eye, a glass through which we see the capitalist class as the lice and bedbugs they really are, and in like fashion, the proletariat become a swarm of red carnivorous ants. In a figurative storming of the Bastille – or Newgate, or San Quentin, or Soledad – the counterpanoptic of the poetic image gives an x-ray view into the infraviolece of capitalist reality. Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, published in 1955, insists that Lautréamont's work is an 'implacable denunciation of a very particular society'. The 'infinite' is precisely that 'denunciation' where, in Adorno's terms, hell wanders through humankind. The world turned upside down, or inside out. Blake, who right now I'm tempted to call the English Lautréamont, tracked a similar activation of perception:

Now will I pour my fury on them, & I will reverse
 The precious benediction; for their colours of loveliness
 I will give blackness; for jewels, hoary frost; for ornament, deformity;
 For crowns, wreathed serpents; for sweet odors, stinking corruptibility;
 For voices of delight, hoarse croakings inarticulate thro' frost;
 For labour'd fatherly care & sweet instruction, I will give
 Chains of dark ignorance & cords of twisted self-conceit

The 'precious benediction', 'crowns' and 'sweet odours' which are all of our birthright have been blasted apart by capitalist alchemy, and our 'voices of delight' have been occupied by advertising, which can only be countered by the 'hoarse croakings' of the poetic hex. But the realities of the prison cell and the police bullet have made poetic beauty banal. Capitalist poetics transform everyday life into the advertiser's sublime. Every abandoned billboard is a bulletin about the nature of your invisibility. The collapse of capital has neutralised poetry's counterpanoptic: Blake becomes an emblem of English nationalism, Lautréamont becomes a refuge for goths. And yet a nonconformist reading might force an electrostatic discharge, a brief flash where whatever remains unstable within the poem – everything that cannot be reduced to simple fetishism – is all that is available. What interested Benjamin about the early 20th Century avant-gardes was their intermingling of 'slogans, magic formulas and concepts'. The sharp clarity of the slogan pierces the esotericism of the magic formula, forming new constellations of meaning and a new rationalism absolutely alien to bourgeois forms of logic. If it's true that only poetry can do this, it's also true that hardly any poetry (be it the so-called mainstream or the so-called avant-garde) actually does do it. When, in the poem 'Black People', Amiri Baraka said 'The magic words are: Up against the wall mother / fucker this is a stick up' he had found the almost invisible point where George Jackson and Lautréamont become the same person, where the revolutionary tract and the esoteric poem become the same thing. The 'wall' is the limit of the poem, and also the contested site where the poem blends into absolute reality, where the 'invisible point', in its moment of crisis, becomes visible, and yet

Ce n'est rien; j'y suis; j'y suis toujours

We need new forms. New modes of *speech*.

Further Notes on Militant Poetics



1. One of the many keys to the meaning of Rimbaud's 'logical derangement of all the senses' is to be found in the title to Joseph Jarman's 1966 poem 'Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City', aspects further indicated in an early poem of Amiri Baraka's: 'in back of the / terminal / where the circus will not go. At the back of the crowds, stooped and vulgar / breathing hate syllables'. This is a city lacking memory, understanding, visibility, history, money or art. 'Aspects' of the city, not areas, meaning that these are not only geographical but psychological zones, zones defined by finance and debt, zones that extend backwards and forwards into history, zones that hang together to create a new / inverted city superimposed onto the one that tourists, bankers and psychogeographers experience: as Frantz Fanon put it, 'a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born'. Or as an early fiction by Amiri Baraka has it: 'the place music goes when we don't hear it no more . . . the silence at the top of our screams'. The secret

of that silence is the secret mutterings of the commodity fetish in its human form, the 'screaming commodity' of slavery. Fanon, again: 'my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things'. The strewn catch-phrases are the wreckage of past and future upheavals and oppressions held together in a violent dialectic which, if you know how to hear, are covering the smooth surfaces of the capitalist tradition with the hollering of dead generations.

2. That the 'tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' cuts both ways. There is class struggle among the dead as well. It is not merely that capital is dead labour, but that the networks of monuments that define and lock the official city – its cognitive aspects – are systems and accumulations of dead exploitation. Those monuments have their secrets: Cedric Robinson talks about just one of the many networks of ghosts they were built from: 'the [slave-ships] also contained African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs and morality. These were the actual terms of their humanity . . . this was the embryo of the demon'. The demon reanimates the subjugated dead, makes them speak. Baraka's 'Leadbelly Gives an Autograph' rescues this dead speech from gothic metaphor: 'The possibilities of statement. I am saying, now / what my father could not remember / to say. What my grandfather / was killed / for believing'. Speech as descent into unofficial history and non-cognitive cosmology. A statement that at one point would have been punishable by death is now the only thing worth saying. The tradition it speaks is one of brutality and murder, history a cacophony of wood and rope. The official world puts a ban on apocalypse – Baraka's poem insists on it.

3. 'The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'. Marx describes the smooth transmutation of human love into stone, metal, money, information and power (the five senses of capital). The possibilities of statement that Baraka would seek to embody in his poem attempt a block on that trajectory, seeking to show that those senses were built from stolen materials, and that they have in any case been violently limited by the forces of capitalist need. In a recent essay Baraka has suggested that the limitation to five senses was produced by capitalist alienation, and that there may be infinite senses, reaching backward and forward into time 'in modes, forms and directions that we do not even know exist'. It is at this point that Marx and Rimbaud can be read together: the derangement of the senses, the derangement of 'all' the senses, is the derangement of the 'labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'. Far from a merely poetic militancy, this is a negation of poetics forcing an active cognition, where Jarman's non-cognitive aspects of the city come to determine the content and form of what can be known historically, culturally,

politically and poetically. In the preface to *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James said that ‘the violent conflicts of our age enable our practiced vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore’. The bones of those revolutions can also be dug up to cast new light on our own conflicts. James goes on: ‘yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect historical emotions in that tranquillity which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with poetry alone’. James recruits poetry for the revolutionary struggle. It forms a collective with other disciplines. The revolution doesn’t become poetic, poetry becomes revolutionary.

4. The basic truth of Aimé Césaire’s famous proposition – ‘poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge’ – has changed a little since the early 1940s. Scientific and poetic knowledge are no longer dialectically opposed, both have been sucked into the non-cognitive counter-vortex of corporate knowledge, in which there are no senses to derange, in which all is, as Marx put it, ‘devoid of eyes, of teeth, of ears, of everything’. This is not to imply that poetic knowledge, thought or writing has a special value due to its absolute irrelevance to corporate nihilism. It is not ‘the opposite of money’. And it is certainly not, as the fatuous Franco Berardi would claim, revolutionary on account of being a somehow authentic, unmediated communication, as if anything could be. There is, in any case, no more ‘authentic’ communication than the corporate state’s power to refuse you food, shelter and life. Workfare and zero-hours contracts are the poetics of capital. Poetic knowledge, alongside scientific, philosophical, historic, political, militant knowledge are collectively the great silence, the great defect and instability at the centre of corporate knowledge. By virtue of that collectivity, and only through it, they still have their chance.

5. Walter Benjamin, at the beginning of the crisis of the 1930s, wrote of the need for a study of ‘esoteric poetry’, and of its ‘secret cargo’. His wager was that the forces of the crisis would enable such a study to reveal the rational kernel of poetic mysticism. ‘We penetrate the mystery only to the degree we recognize it in the everyday world’, he claimed, ‘and perceive the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday’. The ‘impenetrable’ exists in two aspects: the invisible lives of migrant workers, benefit claimants etc, and the invisible workings of capital itself, only partially expressed in the lives of the very rich. Part of the intellectual struggle is to grasp these two ‘mysteries’ in the mind at the same time, and to force into view their destructive unity, opening out into infernal history, into hidden constellations, Robinson’s demon. Poetry cannot do this alone, but it has its own way of contributing to the task. René Ménil, publishing alongside Aimé Césaire in *Tropiques* – an anti-fascist journal disguised as a magazine of poetry and Martinique folklore – wrote that ‘at every moment the poet is unknowingly playing with the solution to all human problems. It is no longer

appropriate for poets to play childishly with their magical wealth; instead, they should criticize the poetic material with the aim of extracting the pure formulas for action'. To extract the magical wealth means that poetry's intensities can come to match, and occupy the intensity of money. Wealth as Hades, as the accumulated dead labour and sensory reality of history, as the law that fixes reality as conflict, as the 'silence at the top of our screams' that becomes audible with the rational clarity of what Hölderlin called 'the eccentric orbit of the dead': an alignment of the planets, the negation of the irrational din of capital itself. The task, as Bertolt Brecht outlined it in the 1930s, is hideous, massive and brutally simple: 'we must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they are planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They're planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things, colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They're out to destroy everything. Every living cell shrinks under their blows. That is why we too must think of everything'.

