



Esther Leslie, 'Bouleversed Baudelairizing: On Poetics and Terror'. (2022) 14(1): *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/bip.9258>



Bouleversed Baudelairizing: On Poetics and Terror

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Reprinted excerpt from Esther Leslie's essay on Sean Bonney, Charles Baudelaire, and Anna Mendelssohn / Grace Lake, first printed as a pamphlet by Veer Books in November 2011. (The original can be purchased at the following link: <https://www.veerbooks.com/Esther-Leslie-Bouleversed-Baudelairizing>.)

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Walter Benjamin translated some poems by Baudelaire. He reflected on the process of translation in the preface to the collection from 1921, called 'The Task of the Translator'.¹ Here he explained what a translation communicated: not the imparting of information, but something that developed from the original, as an echo, emerging in its 'afterlife', its renewal through its existence in another language, another epoch. This is, then, not a theory of translation as nailing the meanings accurately, but rather something more supple and subtle, porous to context, open to historical change. Words as mutable, absorbent, bendable, though not without some sort of historical fidelity. Attention, then, to particularity, to historical resonance, rather than standing to attention before the military tribunal of accurate deciphering, the quasi-religious adherence to 'faithful' conversion.

Sean Bonney's cycle of poems 'Baudelaire in English' takes on this sense of the historical transportation of a poem. It simultaneously samples the original historical energy of the poems (as does any montage aesthetic that valorises the specificity and historical sedimentations of the fragments it deploys) and releases it into the frenzy of the present. Bonney's rendition of Baudelaire's spleeny thoughts transports them into a contemporary idiom releasing something apt from them, something that hits out at the present. The poems cannot be rendered in the traditional format of lines and stanzas. They are graphic, concrete. Any lingering languorousness in Baudelaire's mournful glance across the city is expunged. The language is banalised. The sentiment, elsewhere rendered as 'When the low, heavy sky weighs like a lid/On the groaning spirit' (William Aggeler) or 'When the low, heavy sky weighs like the giant lid /Of a great pot upon the spirit crushed by care', (Edna St. Vincent Millay), is in Bonney reduced and de-poeticised: '&& sometimes th entire City/pisses me off'. Then, no similie is found to complete the image and the fact of this lack is made explicit: 'like (no similie)'. Language is severely doubted – a line is translated, but crossed out and only the word STINKS is legible. It is reduced but it is also stretched. Baudelaire's idea of bored ghosts emerges not where it is in his poem, in the second line, but rather in a new stanza. The poem has been dissected, cut apart and the insides plummet down the page. Then suddenly we are at the bells of Baudelaire's fourth stanza, and, after that moment of touching directly on the poem again, it takes off somewhere else, with only the slightest echo of Baudelaire's obstinately complaining bells in 'defunkt love;s chatter'.

One by one Bonney retranslates Baudelaire's poetry into splenetic anti-verse. The question of 'fidelity' is posed differently. There is no careful and scholarly attention to meaning in the narrow sense, rather faithfulness to meaning in another sense. The viciousness of the original segues with the contingent urgency of the moment. Language is torn. French is mockingly translated and the English into which the poems

are conveyed is one that can only splutter its senses out, on the edge of inarticulacy. This is language damaged, language as damage, language as register of damage. It is a language that hopes to have ingested terror, a terror that might once have been a component of art, but is now absent. Once something we might call aesthetic experience evoked terror. Adorno equates aesthetic experience with the evocation of a shudder. 'Ultimately', he notes, 'aesthetic comportment is to be defined as the capacity to shudder, as if goose bumps were the first aesthetic image'.² The goose bump is the transformation of smooth skin into bumpy surface, through being touched, figuratively. For Adorno, the shudder is a primal component of experience, emerging just as humans began to conceptualise the world and differentiate themselves from amorphous nature. It is a sentiment continued in the phrase 'they shudder to think'. The shudder indexes terror, a register of the uneasiness induced by strangeness. At the same time, though, the shudder is a manifestation of wonder and a recognition of the possibility of anti-egoistic human interrelationships with other or with non-human beings. Shudder is a signal of the possibility of self-transformation. Its twitching indicates a capacity for mimesis, for a connection between self and otherness.³ The shudder, then, is on the cusp. It inaugurates the attempt to master nature, to overcome all that is different. But it also marks the point of an afterwards that might still – if only bodily, unconsciously, involuntarily – remember what it was like to once be touched by something different, unassimilated. The effort to subjugate (or tame) nature eventually threatens to eradicate the shudder. All that is different, nature's otherness, is subsumed in rationality, in industry, in synthetics, in banality. The shudder threatens to dissipate and with it any possibility of true experience.⁴ At moments in our 'damaged lives', particularly moments of true aesthetic encounter, genuine experience still occurs, and when it does, it does so with a shudder, which is, simultaneously, a recognition of the deadening nature of a dull universal fungibility and a self-liquidating encounter with the non-identical, the radically different. The self, for a few moments, recognises itself as semblance. The I, 'that internal agent of repression' is shattered by art, which is, at that moment, 'the historical voice of repressed nature'.⁵

Sean Bonney, born in 1969, has published various pamphlets and volumes of poetry, including *Notes on Heresy* (2002), *Poisons, their antidotes* (2003), *Blade Pitch Control Unit* (2005), *Document: poems, diagrams, manifestos* (2009). His blog, *Abandoned Buildings*, has taken over from earlier more fanzine-like outputs (such as the punk mag style *Cul de Qui*, produced with Jeff Hilson).⁶ The blog acts as a place where his new works are exposed in serial form. Bonney is also a performer. He is known as somebody who spits out his work, rages as he shouts and stammers his lines. He performs his poems in the upstairs rooms of London pubs or on the streets during an anti-war demonstration.

The fanzine format, the presentation on the stage of the politicised streets, the blog as accessible, instant communication (evoking Baudelaire's line at the close of his autobiographical notes 'Fusées' – Skyrockets: 'I want to date my anger'). All these are elements that enhance the energy of the work, draw it out of the normal rarefied environments of poetry. It takes up a space in more seedy areas thematically too. Compare Edna St. Vincent Millay and George Dillon's 1936 version of 'Rêve parisien' and Bonney's from 2008:

Theirs:

I woke; my mind was bright with flame;
I saw the cheap and sordid hole
I live in, and my cares all came
Burrowing back into my soul.

Brutally the twelve strokes of noon
Against my naked ear were hurled;
And a gray sky was drizzling down
Upon this sad, lethargic world.

His:

I live in shit
MY needle life a
bruteist clock---
its always mid-day///
the sky is rolling shadows
all over the choking earth----

The sentiment is degraded, from 'cheap and sordid hole' to 'I live in shit'. 'MY needle life': drugs enter these homes as shitholes, drug dens, which then diverts the metaphor into that of the drugs wearing off and the cares returning to the soul, or rather the body. The motifs that are embedded in Baudelaire in chains of words are placed directly, so the distancing reference to time the chiming clock with its funereal accents becomes simply a clock. The cluttered and languid language of Baudelaire, deployed then as revolt against speed up, register of emergent temporalities, reduces to shock, the spluttered, paratactic mutterings of someone stranded after the new era, and hyped up on anger's energy. The experience is extended – it is always mid-day – not a singular poetic glimpse, but a universal, and so more horrible, more trapped. And the earth is no longer

this passive thing, this melancholic object of contemplation, a poetic object, rather it is choking. The earth, which is our body, chokes for us and with us. It is another version of the old pathetic fallacy, but it is one that figures in a contemporary imagination of ecological crisis, as greenhouses gases choke it and us and the boulevard gives way to escalators and shopping malls.

REVE PARISIEN:::

Nothing mortal has ever seen
 that ~~weird~~ landscape
 torments ~~&&~~ ONCE AGAIN loves Me--

Sleep is a nail////
 I hate the countryside:::
 metal, marble, water BURNS
 this babble. escalators//
 infinite shopping malls
 of strobe ~~&&~~ seizure,
 endless boredom, sexless gold//
 piss cataracts//
 &&& riddled
 suspenders ~~&&~~ plouses --
 metallic sneers((
 TWANG chain dormant
 panic sleep ---
 the universe is limited
 squints like magic
 Tat glasses
 taut shell flex
 insistent////
 like a river or a sky----
 fresh violence""
 suss tunnel rich
 piss, ocean dump--
 ((everything is Clear &
 stars, ban DAZZLES
 abolish ban them ---
 EVERYTHING ~~is~~ sunshine-----
 glow burn ~~is~~ glow
 silence((((&&& silence for
 EVER

 I live in shit
 My needle life a
 bruteist clock---
 its always mid-day///
 all over the choking earth----

The lines in Bonney's Baudelaire poems stamp on each other. They slant and clash on the page. Unpronounceable characters – brackets and commas, asterisks and carets – force their way in to places they should not be. Some words are made barely legible by overtyping. The whole looks like a tumbling pile of words and blackness. It dissuades from a passive, contemplative scanning, and yet it impedes alert reading too. This shake up of poetry stretches lyric form just as Baudelaire in his day stretched lyric form to incorporate new contents, adulterating poetry, in order to make it again, but as something else. Bonney too rips up something that has sedimented into unquestioned value.

Sometimes Bonney takes the language of the enemy – Tony Blair's speeches for one – and slashes it into part meanings, which release its violent truths. Ripping the speech up, tearing speech itself up, exposes the violence that backs the seemingly innocuous articulation. The words are mangled such that they can only be spat or shot out on the edge of comprehensibility, but traces of their ideological force, countered in an almost homeopathic act of debarbing, are still audible, if only because of the predictability of political rhetoric. Those political slogans returned precisely to their origin: 1513 is the first attested use of slogan, the 'battle cry', from the Gaelic *sluagh-ghairm*, the cry of a war-mongering horde.

Poetical Terror

In 2009 the poet Grace Lake died. Also leaving the world in that same bodily form at the age of 61 was Anna Mendelssohn or Mendleson or Mendelsohn, these being other versions of her name. It is no coincidence that these various versions, with their slight typographical shifts, cluster around the work of somebody who spins language curiously, densely, subtly. Grace Lake – as we should call her in reference to her poetic persona – lived the last third of her life in Cambridge, England, from the mid-1980s onwards, where she settled in order to take an English degree at the university. There she had some association, tangentially, with that most underground of poetic brotherhoods, the Cambridge Poets, now multigenerational and encompassing figures such as JH Prynne, Peter Riley, Rod Mengham, Tom Raworth, John Wilkinson, Drew Milne, Simon Jarvis, Keston Sutherland. All of these poets exist, parasitically, at one of the hearts of literary arbitration, but are more accurately represented as its bilious gallbladder and fizzing brain. Their work, like Grace Lake's work, is, at one and the same time, conceptual and unreconciled to what exists, whether raging or coolly negational. Andrew Duncan has characterised the distinctiveness of the work of the Cambridge poets who, in the main, emanate, in some way or another, from the University. It is, he notes, 'puritanical, intellectual, left-wing, inclined to search into conceptual problems even if it means bursting the bounds of existing poetic form'.⁷

Though she was not a central member of this circle of poets, who clustered around the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, held annually from 1991, Grace Lake attended CCCP and her poetry shared the Cambridge poets' collective qualities of density, intensity, intellectualism, indeterminism and lyricism. It came into the world with difficulty. Others ushered an almost private production into publication – those Cambridge others, who sorted out from amongst thousands of handwritten poems and ink drawings a clutch of pamphlets. Rod Mengham's Equipage published *Viola Tricolor* (1993), *Bernache Nonnette* (1995), *Tondo Aquatique* (1997) and, in 2000, attributed to the author Anna Mendelssohn, the large volume *Implacable Art*.

Difficult, agonised, with sentences that swerve off course, Grace Lake's poetry pressures language to release and deny meaning. Here is an example:

i.m. Laura Riding

if thought be woven from the brain wished ill may learn to love again
 a moonlit dusk by lamplight's side a less anxious life
 where proof of purse is not in pride nor strife a jokey vendetta
 beginning twice more to examine extremes of sanctioned shapes
 which knew to lighten mechanics with previewed disfunction
 once the essentials are proven and normalities intergraved
 it will not be mine to decide who are the damned and who the saved.

The poetry is fragmentary, shattered. Lines stops and start as if arbitrarily, and even within lines there is interruption, drop outs, or a loss of focus. And yet there is also something like a different order, which emerges from literary tics of alliteration, form and reference. There is a skein drawn across the whole by scattergun rhymes – and even, sometimes, ones that are unexpectedly expected such as 'intergraved' and 'saved'. Andrew Duncan has written of Grace Lake's poetry as 'social' poetry and he draws it tightly into the orbit of political poetry, that is to say, poetry as dialectical critique of politics, inside the Left, but its better conscience:

I think the whole of Lake's poetic work, is a critique of the determinism of left-wing discourse around 1970 and ever after, including official feminism, how it creates a new imaginary State which imagines the population in the bureaucratic terms of the old one, how it skimps the impossibility of imagining 58 million people as human agents by imagining them as quantities, like money, which can be housed and planned for. This is not an opposition of true-untrue or good-bad, but one of levels of porosity and granularity.⁸

Grace Lake's poetry uses language to refine concepts, ideas, to increase what Duncan terms their granularity, even at the cost of their intelligibility. The language blends vocabulary, making words seep into each other, making them and the poem porous to the word outside poetry, porous in terms of a super-absorbency of significance. Porous means full of pores – interstices, such that, given the poem sufficient attention, a reader might themselves pore over it. Duncan insists that it is 'writing against something always being said'. It adopts the form of reasoned argument, while exploding such logic from within, derailing it, slipping into the emotive, polemical and nervy. It is, notes Duncan, suspicious of the fashionable critical discourses of its times, the times when its author constituted herself as political subject. These became new dogmas, fixed bodies of knowledge, rather than spontaneous re-articulations of transient experience:

A lot of people, in the sixties, found the style of Marx and Freud about as credible as a speech by Harold Wilson; most of the poets who began in that decade, you could say, were attacking official knowledge. The problem was then to create a poetry which was simultaneous and constantly shifting and irrational but never falsifiable, seductively fluent, never slipping back into informativeness to explain what was going on, and, if Lake has found the perfect answer, it shouldn't be too hard for us to remember the question.⁹

There is anger in Grace Lake's poetry. Its frustration with official discourse is borne of a libertarian sense of possibility, or rather a strong desire that language could be different, could say other things, because other things were admissible. It is uncomfortable in this world, but is unable to create any other. It is able only to rearrange language. But there is also playfulness. It is playful to suggest that it could all be rearranged, beginning with word order and ending with social revolution. This revolution (not of the word but of the world) might seem distant from linguistic experimentation. But it forms a part of the force of this work. For everybody who read her also found out sooner or later that Grace Lake, when she was Anna Mendelssohn or, actually in those days, Nancy Pye, was associated with the British libertarian-Communist terrorist group The Angry Brigade, eight of whom, including this poet, were brought to trial in 1971, at that point the longest in British history.¹⁰

IT/104 19 May—2 June 1971

BIBA'S WAS BOMBED

'If you're not busy being born you're busy buying.'

All the sales girls in the flash boutiques are made to dress the same and have the same make-up, representing the 1940's. In fashion as in everything else, capitalism can only go backwards — they've got nowhere to go — they're dead.

The future is ours.

Life is so boring there's nothing to do except spend all our wages on the latest skirt or shirt. Brothers & Sisters, what are your real desires? Sit in the drugstore, look distant, empty, bored, drinking some tasteless coffee? or perhaps

BLOW IT UP OR BURN IT DOWN. The only thing you can do with modern slavehouses — called boutiques — **IS WRECK THEM.** You can't reform profit capitalism and inhumanity.

Just kick it till it breaks.

Revolution,
Communique 8
The Angry Brigade

WARNING FROM I

Hash isn't Pigs don't flowers in everybody radical gro the city co Amsterdam and it is st the streets in fact.

US soldier weapons as officers in year, says and at least Vietnam an junk in a sp report.

PIG MUR

Home Secre not be prob of Stephen chosen to ig

The Angry Brigade (or specifically, the Stoke Newington 8, named after the area of London where they lived) was accused of carrying out or attempting to carry out explosive attacks on property in Britain between 1 January 1968 and 21 August 1971. The targets included the homes of Conservative politicians, the director of the Ford motor factory at Dagenham, a retired policeman, government offices, Conservative clubs, a police station, Spanish airline offices, banks, the home of the headmaster of a public school. Other charges included possessing explosive substances, a pistol, machine guns and ammunition, and receiving a stolen vehicle. Key members of the Angry Brigade had been at university in the late 1960s but left as they became politicised through events in Paris in 1968 and the growth of the movement against the war in Vietnam. A tabloid headline after the raid on their London home screeched: ‘Dropouts with brains tried to launch bloody revolution’.



Mendelssohn denied the charges and defended herself eloquently (claiming that the explosives and weapons found in their home were planted by police). But this was not enough to spare her from the charge of ‘conspiracy to cause explosions’ and she, with the others, received a ten-year prison sentence, of which she served five. Whether she conspired to plant bombs or light fires is unresolved. She certainly used her linguistic skills to support the struggle, drafting the twelfth Communiqué for the Angry Brigade, an essay justifying the bombing of an army recruitment centre in North London. Its rhetoric is less fractured than her poetry and its demands cogent. It concludes:

To any unemployed worker thinking of joining up we ask you one question:

-- WHICH WAY WILL YOU POINT YOUR GUN WHEN THE OFFICERS ORDER YOU AGAINST THE PEOPLE OF YOUR OWN TOWN?..

Who will you shoot when your parents, brothers and sisters are in sight of your gun?

The British boss class has lined its pockets with the accumulated profits of 700 years of exploitation of the Irish working people.

Now they are killing to defend these profits.

THE ANGRY BRIGADE ADVISES THE BRITISH RULING CLASSES TO GET OUT OF IRELAND AND TAKE THEIR PUPPETS (LYNCH, FAULKNER, ETC) WITH THEM.

ANGRY BRIGADE

MOONLIGHTER'S CELL

POINT YOUR GUN

Grace Lake replaced Anna Mendelssohn, the poet pointed a pen, not a gun, and the days of the Angry Brigade and Anna-Nancy were only relayed in various memoirs by those in the milieu or reanimated in the pamphlets and websites of latter-day anarchists fascinated by the story of rebellious vanguardism in the UK. Grace Lake slipped her own small references to the end of Anna and beginning of Grace into a poem called 'London 1971', a reference to the place and year of her arrest:

He deserted the site for the final bombardment to take place, as a favour, preferring Purpose. Returns. Specific Movements. Voices that never fail to sustain a social dimension.

Voices that don't trail off into dyer's land. Voices that don't lounge as precautions to exhaustion in siesta time when observations could cause disruptions in tedium.

In Common

In the final year of her life, the London poet Sean Bonney drew Grace and Nancy and Anna together into his own poetic production, a poem of 140 fourteen line stanzas, titled 'The Commons',¹¹ which appeared over several months in segments on his blog, *Abandoned Buildings*. The title indicates something of the political and social concern that motivates the work. The notion of the Commons has various echoes: the areas of common land from which the populace have been dispossessed; the elements of the environment that could be enjoyed by all, because they evade commodification – the rivers, atmosphere, beaches, forests; the cultural heritage, a social construction consisting of language, social bonds, affects, ideas, all that which derives from the folk

and that from the canon, which has insinuated itself into our memories, and which, through the internet, might be easily and equitably accessed; the House of Commons, that is anything but; the commoners kept firmly outside, also known as the common people. The common has its poetic provenance. In the preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth notes how his

principal object proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect.¹²

In the miasma of the French Revolution, Wordsworth infiltrates vernacular language and ways of the common into the realm of poetry. Bonney's evocation of the commons continues this work in a way appropriate for today, at the other end of industrialisation and now that the term has become associated with a politics of collectivity. To refer to the commons is to indicate a desire for sharing in (and defending the existence and expansion of) public goods, of things held in common and belonging to no-one. It has found theoretical formation especially through the thought of Michael Hardt and (former terrorist sympathiser and prisoner) Antonio Negri.¹³ *The Commons* works on this common property by appropriating lines and themes from folk songs, from common materials, which are then spliced together with popular cultural references alongside ejaculations of anger, 'in splintered oblique English', in landscapes populated by 'exhausted shoppers', zombies, 'used opinions': 'Unaroused by official culture/history has been stashed/below a system of false brains'. Language is corrupted – 'prepared vocab' – and places limits on what can be thought and known: 'but anyway, inside this language/there is no word for sky'. A return, through brokenness, to expression is under way, as part lines return, gather new meaning, new contexts. The scraps of common history, of solidarity, are shown to be fragmented by bourgeois relations of ownership: 'a businessman's/girdle round the earth/is a dream deferred'. Yet these struggle, within the poem, to recombine with each other or to engage in their own war on simplified meanings, on surface truths.

Of gorgeous magnetic fiends
even the memory is blocked:
history's shadow stalks us
call it the net of
the idea is simple

& permanently freakish:
 to live outside of servitude
 the confidence & cowardice
 of those who force us
 into fiction, difficult & locked.
 But the scorn we feel
 BANG
 night of the living dead
 all else is annoyance & avarice

Our present is hell, the zombie realm of the living dead. To live freely – an idea so simple and yet so impossible, a fantasm of freaks and lunatics. Only in our fictions, our Romero movies, can we take our revenge on those who force us to live this half-life, who let us shudder in the cinemas, only so we might feel a semblance of life that we cannot live outside. History accompanies us, as a shadow, there and not there.

Into the mix of the poem too are chucked fragments from the Angry Brigade Communiqués and repeated references to ‘the british anarchist movement’: ‘its scales & documents/splintered under a false full moon/embroidered over with burning gold/not’. ‘We don’t know who they are/not’, states the poem, in reference to the most famous sentiment from the Angry Brigade’s writings: ‘We are not in a position to say whether any one person is or isn’t a member of the Brigade. All we say is: the Brigade is everywhere’. The line ‘He is the man or woman/sitting beside you’ directly references a line in the Angry Brigade’s Communiqué 9: ‘The AB is the man or woman sitting next to you. They have guns in their pockets and anger in their minds’.

One stanza doubts poetry itself at the same time as it reaffirms it, but in this new, battered form:

recent irruptions of unmeaning
 in Kabul etc, where
 we have never been,
 have made poetry obsolete:
 but still my red shoes
 would go dancing,
 tho not a soul would look out
 from the curfew, the
 cosmetics counter,
 everyone knows it,

a sentimental space, purely
 some kind of folk song, to
 give up all love,
 the city hurts when its broken

Poetry itself, it would seem, needs to be overcome, because of its uselessness in relation to the overwhelming senselessness of war, specifically one in Afghanistan that is the longest in US history. Poetry might even be complicit (a legitimating force): 'the dreadful cries of murdered men,/inside poetry'. Or poetry is not even seen, or is thought to be already known, a ditty half-remembered from childhood, not a language of political argument or political practice. Obsolete poetry – the sentiment echoes Adorno's line on the horrors of poetry after Auschwitz from his 1949 essay 'Cultural Criticism and Society':

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.¹⁴

Everything rigidifies. All that exists becomes the 'insignias of the absolute rule of that which is', states Adorno in the lines before these. The mind is on the point of being entirely absorbed: 'but still my red shoes/would go dancing,/tho not a soul would look out from the curfew'. To keep producing poetry like that produced before and during the committing of inhumane atrocities perpetuates the barbarism that masquerades as culture and renders all that emerges under the label creative production reified and unassailable, seemingly a special realm. Later, in the 1960s, Adorno will recant a little – though the recantation is as barbed as the original gesture:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the

coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.¹⁵

The zombie theme is here too. Recollection is disturbed – ‘even the memory is blocked’. And history stalks us like a shadow. Other worlds are nightmares, not utopian dreams. After the horror, coldness, emotionlessness, the default attitude of the bourgeoisie, is the only possible mode to ensure survival (though not living, a distinction the Situationists would make too in the same decade). We ‘give up all love’. But suffering still has to find an outlet. Perhaps in that minority delectation called poetry, yet the scream will out.

Against ‘self-satisfied contemplation’, in favour of the scream, Bonney writes what he terms a ‘revolutionary poetics’. *Abandoned Buildings* publicized a reading list for a ‘Revolutionary Poetics’ on 21 March 2010:

chapters on Pythagoras and Philolaus // Kirk et al THE PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS
(2nd Ed)
ANDREA BRADY /// WILDFIRE: A VERSE ESSAY ON OBSCURITY AND ILLUMINATION
Brecht: German Satires
MAYAKOVSKY // RIMBAUD at the same time
passages on Circulation & Production Time, GRUNDRISSE (Marx, yeh)
Amiri Baraka // Blues People / Black Music / The Dead Lecturer
Poems by CECIL TAYLOR / ANNA MENDELSSOHN
Luigi Nono: como una ola de fuerza y luz // non consumiamo marx
BLACK FIRE: 1968. Edited by Amiri Baraka & Larry Neal
William Rowe: The Earth Has Been Destroyed
Lenin’s Notebooks on Heraclitus & Hegel’s History of Philosophy (passages on
musical tones, electrons)
rockabilly etc // Iancu Dumitrescu // Bud Powell
Walter Benjamin: Epistemo-Critical Prologue ORIGIN OF GERMAN TRAGIC DRAMA
Pasolini : Heretical Empiricism
PAUL CELAN / CESAR VALLEJO at the same time
CLR James: The Black Jacobins
Everybody Talks About the Weather . . . We Don’t: ULRIKE MEINHOF

It is a *mélange* of political theory, radical philosophy, experimental music, pop music, and poetry – a manifesto by association and collage, a lineage of materialist thought from the Pre-Socratics to Ulrike Meinhof. It acknowledges debts to the (artistic) avant-garde and the (political) vanguard, and would endeavour to bring them together. This is a re-splicing of something that has fallen apart.

In 1931, in a radio lecture on the Bastille prison, Walter Benjamin associates revolutionary conspirators and dissident artists.¹⁶ The Bastille was a place of incarceration for people who had upset state security. There were two classes of prisoner held there; those who were accused of conspiracy and treason, and those more numerous inmates who were writers, engravers, book dealers and binders, all people who had propagated books that offended the king or his favourites. Prisoners disappeared from between its walls as swiftly as they had appeared, subject as they were to the whims of the powerful. The storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, home at that moment to just a handful of prisoners, was the first visible act of destruction of the French Revolution, and it occurred, insists Benjamin, because of the arbitrariness of its punishments. What was released then into the French post-revolutionary cosmos was a ragged band of writers, artists, artisans and conspirators. In short, a low-life bohemia of gossip-mongers, art-peddlers and revolvers, who dispersed into the fertile air of a new class-rule. They came from the same place and they went to the same places. Having occupied the same space of confinement, they forged a bond that bore offspring. For it was from their ranks that the avant-garde was born. No longer 'at home' in the prison, these homeless rebels agitated and aggravated from inside the vaster prison of the bourgeois world; opposed to that world, but inside it, they figured a place apart. Clement Greenberg, in 1939, in an essay titled 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', likewise perceived the birth of the avant-garde in amongst the detritus of rebellious bohemia, the world of spies and conspirators and anarchists and revolutionaries.¹⁷ He argued that after 1848, once romanticism has proven itself a spent force, and once the naked venal rule of the bourgeoisie even over its own class was unambiguous, numerous artists, who were cut off from, but also tied, via an 'umbilical cord of gold',¹⁸ to bourgeois society, emigrate to an imaginary place called Bohemia, a place that is 'art's sanctuary from capitalism'.¹⁹ According to Greenberg, through this trip, commencing towards the end of the nineteenth century, much of the avant-garde exits from politics, bourgeois or anti-bourgeois, in order, so they thought, to keep culture alive. A tragedy occurs. The avant-garde is for the most part separated from

the vanguard. The avant-garde disengages from engagement. It severs itself from the crowd of low-life rebels, to become something else. It flees from commitment into form; seeking a pure formalism that is about art itself and only art, or, if it is also about revolution, then it is about it only in the most secretive, suggestive, coded and concealable ways. But, according to Walter Benjamin, there is another outcome to this history, one that issues in the anarchic anti-traditions of Dada and Surrealism (eschewed by Greenberg), one in which the language of rebellion translates into the poetic language of rebellion, revolt and explosivity.

Whence comes Bonney's aesthetic that draws in anarcho-communism, terrorism and philosophy, political activism and political despair? There are traces of a long-standing encounter with the poets around the grouping Writers Forum,²⁰ some of whom – Bob Cobbing for one – prized poems that had been squashed out of the black dust of photocopiers, which had been confused by the moving objects on their glass panes. The poetry has absorbed and re-emitted the bitter contortions of language in Cambridge poetry, as passed down from JH Prynne to Keston Sutherland. It is inflected by the hip and righteous anger of the Beat poets. But it is also of the street ('bright magnetic streets', notes Bonney in *The Commons*), as Baudelaire was before it. It is also as much born of Punk and the lyrics of Mark E. Smith of the unpopular English band The Fall, themselves a contortion of the popular surrealism of Captain Beefheart. Punk itself is an amalgam. It emerged out of an implausible splicing of Situationist high theory and negational practice and unmusicianly rock 'n' roll. It fused the critical negational energies of French Situationist theory from Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem with the positive expressions of youthful creativity and generational revolt that had been incubated by a thousand working class American popsters and a trashy culture of movies, cartoons, pornography and tabloids. This is not at all the same as saying that it merged high and low – that was the culture-affirming principle of a later mode of postmodern cultural critique. Punk's mix was confusing, hot-tempered and disruptive. Its very basis was splitting, making ludicrous some previous cultural forms, with their pretensions to be art. It upset and contaminated certain taboo signs, notably swastikas, liberally sprinkled over monarchs, hippy business men, such as Richard Branson and punks alike. Punk made a mark that looked like a wound or a rip, self-harm or social harm, no future or one built up anew from below, shambolically, contradictory in its very gesture.

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Like Punk and like Surrealism, the language of Bonney's boulevered Baudelaire and his paeon to the Commons cannot shake off a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the streets, attraction and repulsion in relation to the vulgar commercial contents that line them, the violence that is more or less openly manifest on them. The language and the mode of address is enraged and engaged. Yet the anger and the desire to act cannot mesh coherently, because that coherence would be too complicit with corrupted thinking. It can, however, be a common resource, a splintered reservoir of memory, of anti-spectacular citations of old revolts, of discussions amongst ourselves of old failures. The graphic nature of Bonney's Baudelaire poems impedes their easy reading, their untrammelled communicative ability, because their so obvious truths find it hard to make a passage into the world. It is as if all is turned backwards or on its head, toppled over or disarranged, in order to be all the truer. Their visual and graphic form suggests something splattered on the pavement, words that rose up in advertising and avant-garde poetry smashed back down to the ground, to the common ground, in order to rally the troops, our troops, to combat a terror that is outside us, but in every syllable of our language, every grain of our word and world. Shattering linguistic coherence, writing anti-writing, exploding the even line on the page, making anti-sense, upping the ante, allows, at least, a glimpse of parallel – potential – words and worlds that might be yet re-articulated.

Notes

- ¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Selected Works*, vol.1, pp253–63.
- ² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, The Athlone Press, London 1997, p331.
- ³ This argument is voiced in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, from 1947, co-authored by T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer.
- ⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p80.,
- ⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p246.
- ⁶ <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/>
- ⁷ Andrew Duncan, *The Failure of Conservatism in Modern British Poetry*, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2003, p54.
- ⁸ Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache nonnette*, by Grace Lake', in *Angel Exhaust: Bizarre Crimes of the Future*, no.15, Autumn 1997.
- ⁹ Andrew Duncan, 'Nine fine flyaway goose truths: *Bernache nonnette*, by Grace Lake', in *Angel Exhaust: Bizarre Crimes of the Future*, no.15, Autumn 1997.
- ¹⁰ There are now a number of memoirs and histories of the Angry Brigade. A useful resource is online: <http://recollectionbooks.com/siml/library/AngryBrigade/>
- ¹¹ All quotations from the poem are drawn from the PDF version that circulated amongst those who requested it via the blog in 2010, just prior to its publication by Seagull Press.
- ¹² Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), *The Complete Poetical Works of Willaim Wordsworth*, Houghton, Mifflin & Company, New York, 1932, p791.
- ¹³ See, for example, the trilogy *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), as their notion of the common and commons is progressively worked out as a sublation of the private and the public.
- ¹⁴ Adorno, *Prisms*, Samuel and Shierry Weber trans, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1983, p34.
- ¹⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton transl, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp362–3.
- ¹⁶ The lecture is called 'The Bastille, Old French State Prison', delivered in 1931, and is in *Gesammelte Schriften* VII.1, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1991, pp165–73.
- ¹⁷ Clement Greenberg in 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' [1939] in Paul Wood and Charles Harrison [eds.], *Art in Theory; An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Blackwell 1992.
- ¹⁸ 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in Wood and Harrison [eds.], *Art in Theory; An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p533.
- ¹⁹ 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' in Wood and Harrison [eds.], *Art in Theory; An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, p556.
- ²⁰ For some context to some of the output of the Writers' Workshop, Publishing House and Network that was formed in 1963, see David Miller and Richard Price, *British Poetry Magazines 1914–2000: A History and Bibliography of 'Little Magazines'*, British Library, London 2006.

