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The Poetics of Despair: Listening to Sean Bonney in Charlottesville, Virginia

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This short piece recounts the experience of listening to recordings of Sean Bonney's work in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the years preceding and following the white supremacist rally held there in 2017. It argues that Bonney's poetry provides a poetics of despair that resists complacency and paradoxically offers comfort.

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I never met Sean Bonney but I know his voice so well I've dreamt about it. One summer in graduate school, I found a recording of Bonney reading online and loaded it, along with a lot of other literary material, onto whatever portable device I had then. I lived a mile from the English Department, and not wanting to spend any time not studying for my upcoming doctoral comprehensive exams, I'd walk to class or to teach with my head down, weaving through crowds of underdressed undergraduates, listening to whatever came up, which was often Bonney. It felt like being radicalized in a vacuum. The reading was a 2011 one from *The Commons*, eighteen minutes of an angry British voice shouting a radical rant whose politics I barely understood directly into my head, eighteen minutes of fury studded with bits and bobs of the most beautiful poetry I'd ever heard, some of it older tropes stolen magpie-like from the tradition of English verse and some of it Bonney's own unforgettable acerbic-sweet concoction:

> O bitter magnet, we shine
> inside the most vivid colours
> —archaic pop reference here—
> but my methods are scholarly
> like many a gallant gentleman
> I lay gasping on the ground
> magnetic & flashing
> as any wild-wood swine
> we spoke with hail but—
> 'most fertile yuppie scum'
> my methods are—
> I seem to have anarchic tendencies
> but I hang around with Trots.

I passed my exams around Thanksgiving and kept listening to Bonney's voice. The next fall rolled around, and I started writing my dissertation and teaching double so I could join my partner in Ireland the next spring. This was a difficult fall in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was 2014, three years before people in the U.S. started saying 'Charlottesville' and meaning the summer 2017 white supremacist rally that killed Heather Heyer—before saying 'Charlottesville' meant white men with torches and meant how could this happen here. But Charlottesville was always Charlottesville, and it was its fucked-up self long before 2017. I grew up in southern Appalachia, so it wasn't Charlottesville's southernness that was strange to me. Charlottesville, however, was a combustible mix of money and power under a veneer of southern gentility, disenfranchised and disenchanted local folks systematically excluded from that money and that power,

and a history that disingenuously championed racist and chauvinist values ('honor') under the guise of liberal intellectual inquiry. In 2014, *Rolling Stone* magazine ran a story of a sexual assault at one of the university's fraternities. It was later discredited and retracted, but it revealed a truth: the gaping maw of sexual violence that is the university's Greek system. When my students read the story of a woman gang-raped at a party on the shards of a broken glass table, they recognized things that might have happened. I felt shattered. There was a protest and I yelled; I gave speeches in which I said it was ok to be angry. I cried in many well-tended autumnal university gardens and on benches beneath leafless magnolias. I couldn't do anything; I despaired.

Sean Bonney's became part of my poetic canon of despair during those days, during which I was also writing the poems in my first book. The only thing that could comfort me in my rage and sadness—a particular balance of which leads quickly to despair—was certain incantatory verse that matched the intensity of the world's wrongness. If I wasn't listening to Bonney I was often repeating the lines that seemed most right to me. They were—they are—so satisfying. I felt like Edmund Spenser, damning the four elements in his elegy 'Daphnaida':

> I hate the heaven, because it doth withhold
> Me from my love, and eke my love from me;
> I hate the earth, because it is the mold
> Of fleshly slime and fraile mortalitie;
> I hate the fire, because to nought it flyes,
> I hate the ayre, because sighes of it be,
> I hate the sea, because it teares supplyes.

Or I marched to class to the beat of John Donne, in his 'Nocturnal upon Saint Lucy's' Day: 'I am every dead thing'. Or I waited at the bus stop thinking Adrienne Rich's words from 'Twenty-One Love Poems' over and over: 'and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms'. Especially in the tense and breathless reading voice I never heard in person, Bonney's pitch is up there with the high drama and grief of these poems. The only poet I can think of who can match such sustained (and artful) immediacy:

> black is the colour of my
> gestural forthrightness—
> gently drops the rain
> cold blows the wind:
> in May 1968, most
> young people were working in

Woolworth's, the cosmetics counter,
was so adventurous, a
cloister of learning &
trust, all was represental—
cold / blows the future
ballads of the
BLANK
my true love

In these lines, and throughout *The Commons*, I also love the various pasts that are hearkened back to, pulled into the present, and even pushed forward into the future. Here, the 1968 revolutionary moment and the way it was experienced (or not) is conjoined with all the bleak and poignant strains of the ballad tradition ('black is the colour', 'cold blows the wind', etc). This is the wreckage of a uniquely British poetic history—a commons—of love and violence, but I had also known some of these in their Appalachian variants—Jean Ritchie, for instance, singing 'The Cuckoo is a Pretty Bird' in a voice as rough as Bonney's. And I love the wild, operatic shifts in tone that come through as loudly on the page as they do in Bonney's reading, the deadpan or deadly theatrics ('ballads of the / BLANK', 'The cuckoo is a / BANG') and the performative (in the J.L. Austin sense) voicings: 'slaughter the fascist BNP'.

We tend to think of despair as a flat and dead-end state. But what Bonney does in *The Commons*, and throughout his work, is to take despair and give it poetic texture and historicity. Elsewhere, in his prose letters, despair is given the directional vector of an address to another person. It's this sharp, glittering, opulent, substantial despair that I needed, and still need, most from Bonney's work. I think despair is a necessary state. I think moments of hopelessness, if that's what despair is, are vital in a world that is sometimes without hope. You could put it this way: if there isn't really any hope, the opposite of despair isn't hope but a stupid unthinking complacency that masquerades as happiness. Sean Bonney's work makes despair into a useful thing: you can take it, he says, and make it shiny like a peacock and hard like a brick and throw it through a window and see what happens.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.