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The Involution of the Storm Corner: Sean Bonney's Occult

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This essay constructs an understanding of Sean Bonney's occult poetics, especially in his prose-poem 'Second Letter on Harmony', through its mediation of past traditions of 'occult poetry'—specifically, Stephen Jonas and the Boston school—with the philosophy of history of Ernst Bloch in *Heritage of our Times* and Bertolt Brecht's uses of alienation, particularly the notion of 'gesture'. Bonney's methods of apprehending a multifaceted reality, composed of darkness, antipodes, contraries and hiddenness, as much as clarity, self-sameness, light and truth, are related to although different from the occult's methods of transformation which make the hidden 'visible'. I argue that Bonney estranges already estranged and fetishised knowledges and facts in their contradictoriness, as a mode of turning knowledge 'inside out', whose results are channelled towards anti-fascist struggle and revolutionary praxis. Bonney's occult poetics seeks to re-appropriate zones of fascist cultural hegemony, such as the occult, making these ripe for revolutionary rediscovery. This very practice sets out a materialist means of communicating with the dead.



The Involution of the Storm Corner: Sean Bonney's Occult

I have always looked to others for extensions of myself
 I was unable to employ. Now faced with their death
 I see the difficult heritage left and unexplained cause
 of our friendship, as if stars cast glow upon each other

 and when die, or burn out, the others, remaining
 blaze more brightly on their own. Faced with an unyielding firmament
 I remember friends of a generation ago, and see their eyes,
 milky black and dawn blue, as if I knew heaven, too -- once.

John Wieners, 'Ungrateful City'¹

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals but gives a sign.

Heraclitus, Fragment B93²

A burdened transmission—'difficult heritage'—and a question of the cosmic that is bound into its radiophonic emission and orbit. These harmonic connections and light waves flame out from the event of Sean's death. The glowing light, the burning out, remain in the 'blaze' of the aftermath, turning us towards images Sean made visible in their contradictory invisibility, so we might remain in their memory, impressed on the retina. What is this 'Light', presented in such constellations? How is it transmitted? These are questions past poetic traditions considered—even identified with, as the remnants of an occult philosophy—and which I refer to through a kind of möebius theory of death and its aftermath I'm adopting from conversations with Sean, which comes to be meaningful in thinking about his own ideas in this aftermath. 'The others' coming after 'blaze more brightly on their own', but I attempt, trepidatiously, to compensate for Sean's absence by describing some of the ideas which came up repeatedly in our conversations. The idea for this piece of writing came from such a conversation between myself and Sean, in June 2019, a conversation began but then 'left and unexplained'. Sean became and is now a kind of oracle who 'neither speaks nor conceals' but 'gives a sign'. Before the 'unyielding firmament', I try to extrapolate from the 'signs' given.

The mid-century Boston poet Stephen Jonas and Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of our Times* were the conversation's main subjects. I've wondered ever since what Sean meant by the connections he made between the two figures. Jonas—a problematic figure in many ways, with his poetics, style and economic theory built out of connections with

and the influence of Ezra Pound that were not so much simply aesthetic as political—was nonetheless energetically explosive, at times catalysing a kind of lyrical revolt. The question of his convinced occultism came up—many of his books, much like the titles and inspiration of Boston poets of the same scene like John Wieners and Gerrit Lansing, focused on mutated references to tarot and alchemy—which Sean said could be re-captured, re-appropriated from and taken out of the hands of fascist occultism. That kind of occultism had an irrational critique of institutional knowledges and of society, which led at times to similarly irrational targets of ire—there was a suspicion that Jonas inherited Pound’s anti-Semitism precisely through his occult vision of money, for example, along with possessing a general patriarchal vision of poetic tradition common to many more than Pound.

Per Ernst Bloch, the way of relating to these pockets of reactionary thought was not to consign them to the refuse pile, turning them into one element of wreckage to ‘overcome’, in rational progressive time. History is instead a ‘*polyrhythmic and multispatial entity*’.³ Sean cited Bloch’s notion of the ‘danger zone of the ‘remnant’’, a regressive zone of social energy which outlasts its historical moment, and represents the possibility of ‘restoration’.⁴ Bloch saw these ‘*storm corner(s) of possible reaction*’ as not to be ignored, or ‘abandoned’ to the ‘forces of reaction’ but whose energy had to be recaptured and re-presented.⁵ This is precisely because these ‘zones’ represent the possibility for reaction to realise itself, as its training ground. In fact, faced with worldwide fascist ascendancy, and a cultural world increasingly populated by fascist sympathisers or references to fascist avant-gardism, this recapture was not just desirable, energetically expedient, but, for Bonney, necessary in the contemporary fight against fascism. As if to say, do not let the occult be occupied by fascism. In doing so, the critique of administered knowledge can easily stray towards the propaganda of right-wing aesthetics, with its seemingly subversive, anti-capitalist verve and its critique of Enlightenment thought. This energy can also be harnessed for our struggle. This unresolved temporal drag would have to be exploded in a kind of untimely alchemy, if it is not to retain its own dynamitic force—and the fragments which remain in the aftermath be reworked into anti-fascist aesthetics and action.

Sean’s sense of poetic authority is not parodied in comparing him to Apollo and the oracle; instead I want to bring up a lineage of poetic thinking that sees all transmission of poetry and poetic lineage as ‘oracular’ in this way, working through the interpretation of signs, rather than dynamics of expression and concealment. Jonas adhered specifically to this vision. The version here of poetic meaning borrows from a Heideggerian lineage of concealment and disclosure, the mutations of *aletheia*, even if it, as much as certain occult philosophies, constructs itself through Heraclitus and his

metaphysics, in which hiddenness rather than directness prevails.⁶ Sean's poetry is not expressionist in the manner of disclosure, but works through the *selective*, exaggerated, and estranged recourse to signs, scraps, fragments of world. Later I will describe how this works through something more like Brechtian *Gestus*—attitude, which I think is closely connected to the function of the sign. While hermetic concealment and bursts of expression are present in his work, and moments of enigma as much as truthful and direct speech retain their force, these function according to the puncturing through of 'signs', blazons, quasi-kabbalic symbols, moments of a language that neither expresses nor conceals but does both at once, presenting itself. In a Marxist lexis, scientific rather than alchemical, this might be seen as *Darstellung*, presentation, rather than *Vorstellung*, representation.⁷ Instead of drawing out an architectonic mirror of a parallel reality—an elaborated *inferno* or *paradiso*, an alternate society, a vision of the future—these signs show something more like 'the efficacy of an absent cause': the existence of the structure of reality in its multiple effects.⁸ Bonney's vision, then, rests on a notion of totality, but not one that might be fully rationalised and represented. The methods for apprehending it are various.

Bonney's inheritance from the occult does not present itself as a repertoire of discrete symbols, such as would appear in a Jungian collection of archetypes or the figures of Tarot, referring back to a pre-established underlying, perhaps noumenal system corresponding to phenomena, even though figures such as these do occasionally appear in his work. Bonney's poetry is not concerned to interpret the world according to a pre-existing, partially-hidden schema. Nowhere does he elaborate such a systematic viewpoint disconnected from the appearance of the structure in its effects, in its manifestations, as does a more fully occultist poet constructing an esoteric system, like W. B. Yeats in *A Vision* (1925), with its succession of social stages, be these communist or fascist, represented by antithetical and primary 'gyres'.⁹ His conception rests more on the fragmentary notion of 'constellation' that Walter Benjamin describes in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' beginning his *Trauerspiel*, in which constellations, instead of systematisable concepts and laws, approach the status of 'Idea'.¹⁰ The shape of the relations between stars relate to 'constellations', which gives constellations their force of signification, in a similar way that empirical things relate to ideas—that is, there is no objective 'relation' or meaning behind the form of constellations, even if the shape of these relations between stars remains objective. Ideas come to be independent of objective 'facts', while nonetheless inhering in their form. Bonney refers continually to these constellations, and to the interpretation of the stars as displaced versions of his continual analogies for social control and its subversion. In the 'Second Letter on Harmony', the principal text by Bonney which I will focus on in this essay, he writes

that John Coltrane's music is 'a dimensional time-loop through the already seismic constellations set up within the music's harmonic system, becoming a force that moves beyond any musical utterance'.¹¹ Here, we might think of utterance as phenomena, and musical constellation as idea; the force of the musical constellation is 'beyond' the empirical without underlying or subtending it in a relational fashion. Bonney wishes to harness this force of the Idea, without becoming an idealist, an irrationalist or detached from the material world, recognising truth in direct intuition as well as in its contrary, transcendent or hermetic knowledge.

Bonney, likewise, presses in his poetics on a secret truth that is *already present* within language and speech as enigma—and not in the manner of system or law. It does not need to be specifically spoken, revealed or disclosed but exists multiply in language—especially the omnipresent language of social repression—as sign. He connects this to the capacity for manifestations—co-ordinations, harmonies, connections—to become the points where violence, praxis, and the world as a formation of reality bursts through the fabric of alienated speech and social life (these two being seen as a unity). Here we might recall again Benjamin, in his invocation of the surging up of 'moments of danger' in contact with the past, and his insistence in 'Toward the Critique of Violence', that the 'mere manifestations' of force in 'mythic violence' are the very lynchpins of a latent structure of law, as opposed to the divine violence of revolution, which only 'awaits'.¹² From the 'Second Letter', again, we have Bonney describing Coltrane's sublime, screechingly experimental album *Live in Seattle* as,

[O]ne of the sonic receptacles of a revolutionary moment that was never realised: that is, it has become a Benjaminian monad, a cluster of still unused energies that still retain the chance of exploding into the present. Play it loud in the Walthamstow shopping mall and you'll see what I mean. Yeh yeh yeh. (34-5)

Bonney turns hermeticism towards manifestation—not of a predestination that would play itself out in progression but of a revolutionary *Kairos*, a moment of realisation. The *unrealised* revolutionary moment crosses over into the potential, which carries force: it becomes a modality of the future. The reality of the unrealised is made manifest, energetically.

In much the same way, we might think of Bonney attempting to transform the energetic repertoire of the 'danger zone of the remnant', especially in the form of Jonas' intensely sonic, jazz-inflected, fragmentary, sometimes staccato poetry. Might Jonas' erratic counter-rhythmic sonority not also be described as a 'a high metallic wire', 'a metal bone' (35), producing 'a new ground outside of official harmony,

from which to act' (36), as Bonney describes Coltrane? Speaking backwards from the unforeseen moment of divine violence, the oracle emits signs, surveying the wreckage, in turn relayed by Bonney. Bonney's occult work is the movement of this enigmatic revolutionary testament. Yet, we could also describe it as the concentrated reversal of the 'signal panic' proper to proletarian social life, to use the words of John Wieners in 'Children of the Working Class': a testament of defeat, the 'never realised', a futurity otherwise consigned to desperation.¹³

In the following sections of this essay, I don't intend to catalogue Bonney's interest in the occult per se, nor specifically go into the many varied references to occult practice he engages, whether Kabbalah, alchemy, cartomancy, spirit possession, necromancy. Nor will my argument rest merely on the well-worn distinction between Enlightenment rationalism and occultist irrationalism, a distinction which does not particularly concern Bonney, although it is present in Bloch's *Heritage of our Times*, where the 'danger zone' is first mentioned, even if used there critically. This distinction becomes the calling card of certain versions of contemporary occultism seeking, in the fashion of Romantic anti-capitalism, to distance cultural production from the progressive time of Enlightenment, in supposed preference for the liberating capacities of the irrational from the capitalist *Ratio*, from the rationalization, administration and institutionalization of social life and languages. In doing so, this Romanticism preserves the distinction between rationality and irrationality, rather than questioning the entwinement of these positive and negative visions of mediation. Bonney is well aware of the capacity of occultism to represent reaction, since 'we don't have any kind of monopoly on harmonic invisibility, and all of those occultist systems that some of us still love so much have always been bourgeois through and through' (33-4). Here we see, then, both a stated 'love', and an indictment: what later in the same 'Second Letter on Harmony' he will call 'dialectical love, undeclared logic' (35). Bonney preserves both terms – the rational and the irrational, the revealed and the hidden, the Light and the darkness – in the dialectical, double capacity of the sign, its both alienated and disalienating potential. The use of signs refers to an alternate interpretation of the world and its truth, closely connected to a reimagined, revolutionary esotericism which sits, paradoxically, not far distant from 'direct, clear communication' (35), or 'the revolutionary movement striving for clarity and influence' (35). In these phrases, reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's 'Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth', Bonney captures and turns the subversive power of symbolism, entering the territory in which signs can be explosive, towards clarification, communication, the channelling of energy, the *realization* of force, the 'single, distinct word' which in Brecht's imagination could cause a regime to fall 'to dust', like a house of cards.¹⁴ And so Wieners' *Ace of Pentacles*

and Jonas' tarot diary might submit themselves to this fall, this disintegration of the regime of social reality. Yet Jonas was wary of clarity, in his attendance to the only 'half-illuminated', the 'heretofore unplumbed depths': 'The entire process/in vacuo /no place is meant to indicate/clearly'.¹⁵ A suspicion of 'a realm where/everything is visible', which would coincide with the 'exclusive present' motivated him to plumb precisely such darkneses.¹⁶ Bonney attends to darkness, yet his modes of making the hidden visible differ.

In recovering Bonney's sense of what could be salvaged from occult poetic traditions like that of the Boston circle, which Lansing once described in his preface to Jonas' *Exercises for Ear* as the 'School of Boston, in poetry, middle this century [...] an occult school, unknown'¹⁷, we see coming into view the transformational potential in recovering and involuting the 'danger zone of the remnant', Bloch's 'storm corner', as well as the importance of working upon the seam of this explosive material to defuse its potentially fascistic drive and turn its energetic potential towards revolutionary action. The 'old Boston vortex'—or 'vertex', as Lansing also wrote—though not specifically right-leaning, took over traditions of theorising economic history from 'Wyndham Lewis & Pound', without political comment.¹⁸ Bonney's use of this tradition is in order 'to knock these weapons out of the hands of the forces of reaction' and to 'occupy' rather than 'ridicule wholesale' the *Irratio*, producing a 'dialectically useful 'inheritance'' (2) formed of the non-contemporaneous: the constellated and dialectical, rather than the merely rational.¹⁹

Anti-Fascist Attitude

Unlike people's actions and endeavours, [the gesture] has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture. This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an activity, the more gestures we obtain.

Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*²⁰

Here, in Benjamin's citation of Brecht's notion of *Gestus*, we find something approaching a formal principle of estrangement, and of interruption as this form-giving operation. While Brecht's context is theatrical, I borrow this notion of the formal transformations of *attitude* and its estranging approach to citation, to describe Bonney's method of presentation and transformation. This alienation of the alienation is not only a formal

attitude but becomes a principle in the relation to tradition—a principle of counter-transmission. The selectivity that is involved in this ‘enclosure’ of the gesture becomes an alienation of the alien, and an estrangement of the estranged, returning alienated history and tradition into the hands of its past and present victims, ‘the irruption into the present time of the screams of the bones of history’ (36), the revolution and its mutations in the image becoming ‘a place where the dead and future generations meet up’ (34). This is Sean’s paraphrase of Bloch. We might recall that for Bloch, revolutionary inheritance must take its cues from the past, but *selectively*, in order to channel these for the future of the revolution. Heiner Müller, in *Germania*, adheres to this interpretation of Brecht’s ‘gesture’, seeing it as selection, partiality, partisanship of interpretation.²¹ I emphasise this selectivity because we might relate it to the notion of the constellation; almost as though the ‘living flux’ of life, instead of being seen as continuous, might be taken as a series of moments of alienated social life, constantly interrupted, where there is a non-relationship between the discrete moments. This also criticises Heraclitean, and thereby many later vitalist, notions of flux. Instead of totality itself, we can apprehend points in flux as tessellated gestures, like stars and things, through which we might reconstruct an opposing ‘Idea’. For Brecht, the Character is both larger than and transcends the part, *and* is identified only through the series of these parts, these gestures, even in their non-relation to one another. Brecht writes that the gesture is a ‘representation that alienates [...] one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar’.²² Bonney engages in constant citation, referring by parts to different points of view, different poetic and theoretical tendencies. These are by turns recognisable and unfamiliar, esoteric and domestic, common and wild. We follow him in series, which only rises to the feeling of flux through its own transcendence in ‘music’, Bonney’s mode of theoretical stream of consciousness he calls ‘Letters’. In these Letters, Bonney is his own character, and the gesture refers to the self he creates from which to write.

Bonney’s relation to his occult forebears is precisely through this selective citation, parody and transformation, which allows him to alienate mystical knowledge’s relation to the secret, to the *occulted*, proposing a new visibility without invoking merely Enlightenment connotations. He proposes a relation to poetic mysticism which preserves and supersedes it. This is very different from what passes today for a critical relationship to reactionary thought. Reactionary thought itself today identifies itself with the gesture and the tone of irony, a suspension of belief that holds contraries together, taking up the occult or religion or the ideas of the right as distanced experiments in trying on a posture. This is despite the fact that this very posture is itself part of the repertoire of the right. Supposedly, this mode of adopting a posture is

critical. Yet as Denise Riley writes in *The Words of Selves*, such adoption often comes close to ‘Manipulation, or else superciliousness’ in its emphasis on a protective knowingness of detachment. For Hegel, as she recounts, the style of ironism (in the Romantic irony, e.g. of Schlegel and Fichte) becomes a ‘formalism of the I’, for which ‘skill in living an ironical artist life apprehends itself as a *God-like geniality*, for which every possible thing is a mere dead creature, to which the free creator, knowing himself to be wholly unattached, feels in no way bound, seeing that he can annihilate as well as create it’.²³ Bonney’s technique of relating to the past is not ironic, even while holding contraries together and distancing these. He takes on postures—gestures, attitudes—but not in the mode of ironic detachment. If anything, his negativity and sarcasm is more derisive and decisive: more the *take no prisoners* of Amiri Baraka’s ‘screamed riff’ spreading like fire (referenced in the ‘Second Letter’) than defensive disengagement. If we think to the ‘things’, facts, riffs, and utterances Bonney refers to, he does not see these as ‘mere dead creatures’, which he can dominate. Instead dead creatures surge up through the life of things, making their invisible presence appear, through their phenomenological resistance and symbolic disfigurations. In Marx’s vision of commodity fetishism in *Capital Vol. 1*, *There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things*.²⁴ Dead labor, encased in commodities, flashes out from its fetishistic half-life, emitting ‘the battle-cries of the dead’ (34), that light up into ‘blue, electric fire’ (35) out from the reified rhythms our feet tap into the ‘star encrusted ground’ (33). Music and harmony will no longer be ‘commodity’, shopping mall background anthem, but ‘the irruption into present time of the screams of the bones of history’ (36). If, as Hegel writes, ‘the *being of Spirit is a bone*’—it is, as much as a thing is—dead creatures and things might be able to exit their formalistic annihilation, persisting.²⁵

Yet if the agency is given back to the dead and future generations, screaming out through the life of things, what is Bonney’s role in this channelling? Is he a mere bystander? Part of his attraction to occult tradition, I argue, is the way it allows us to imagine this ‘channelling’, this oracular mediation. In the last part of this essay, I will look at Jonas’ view of occult Tradition, and the way we might show the resemblance between these as well as distinguish its reactionary tendencies from the channelling Bonney invokes.

Turning Tradition Inside Out

This section will refer to two letters: firstly, Jonas’ letter, published in *Caterpillar 11*, written on the event of Jack Spicer’s death in 1965 but published by Clayton Eshleman in 1970, after Jonas’ own death. Secondly, I will conclude by saying a bit more about the

‘Second Letter on Harmony’, to which I’ve been referring so far. Both, I think, deal with the aftermath of death, and elaborate positions on writing in relation to it.

The first letter appears with a prefatory letter describing its discovery by Raffael de Gruttola and Gerrit Lansing, found in Jonas’ unpublished manuscripts. Gruttola describes it as having a ‘Revolutionary Spirit’ of the kind which went into his later work.²⁶ The letter begins:

I have been moved by the death of Jack Spicer. For the past month since this unfortunate event, some communication has been attempting to get thru to me. I feel that the Oracle made efforts to inform him, however due to his, Spicer’s, refusal to investigate certain areas of History, Economic History, and the Tradition available only to those whose mental chemical makeup is such that it is favorable to enlightenment, he did not receive communication. This must not reoccur.²⁷

Again, here, we see a reference to ‘Economic History’, Jonas’ inheritance from Pound, not without its anti-Semitic connotations. The letter goes on to elaborate Jonas’ sense of a kind of unconscious public conspiracy. From the contemporary vantage point, Jonas sounds like common currency in the era of ascendant conspiracies, of paranoid fantasies; ‘certain realizations that must be accepted by us’ (63), he writes. These include that ‘The Republic of the United States’ no longer exists, since it is under conquest by an internal foe: the ‘insemination of foreign monies among the members of both our houses of Congress’, with ‘aids working inside the Nation to their interests’, who ‘with their monetary power effected the National Banking Act in 1862’ (63). It extends to ‘The control of press, books, and later radio and T.V. [...] the conquerors’ iron-tight policing of the Nation’ (63). These inseminators and foes control political parties, and the Nation as a whole, but remain hidden behind acts of state; something which sounds not dissimilar to modern-day deep-state conspiracies, profoundly mired in the politics of the right. In combating this foe, Jonas’ suggestion is ‘to transmit the Light to the seceding generations, keep each other informed from our posts scattered across the Nation’ (63); ‘We have the duty imposed upon us to transmit the Light’ (63). He continues, setting himself up as an oracular figure: ‘From time to time I shall write letters to you revealing the hidden implications behind movements, acts of state, and persons, in the public eye [...] The Light has gone out. The Devil sits upon the throne of the world. All things to make sense must be reversed. Our only guide is the Secret Tradition and let us find ourselves to be Watchers’ (64). Then, continuing the riff on anti-Semitic tropes, he seems to suggest the nobility and corruption by dilution and ‘weakening’ of Egypt. ‘A sign will appear and we must be at full recognition to receive

it' (64): here Jonas does not subscribe to the notion of partiality, but sees himself as capable of 'full recognition', total comprehension of the reality to which the sign refers. He signs the letter with his own name and the names of his contemporaries, to whom the letter is addressed: Stephen Jonas, Gerrit Lansing, Robert Duncan, John Wieners, Charles Olson, Robin Blaser, Robert Kelly.

Jonas' profoundly paranoid vision of 'Economic History' sits uncomfortably with contemporary understandings of the fascist tendencies of conspiracy; Jonas sounds as though he is speaking in right-wing dog-whistles. These are mixed among a positive, identificatory (although almost cliqueish) view of poetic tradition, among poets who are imagined to be engaged in an unconscious revolutionary organisation, partaking of this 'Revolutionary Spirit'. What would it take to turn this spirit itself 'inside out' — too marred by its lack of explanation apart from the *deus ex machina* of 'inseminators', too reminiscent of racially and nationally protective conspiracies, too patriarchal in its virile pretensions and insistence on a set of 'Watchers' only composed of men?²⁸

In Bonney's referring to, and taking on the gestures of the 'occult tradition' of poets, he skirts the border of the paranoid, conspiratorial vision of 'All things to make sense must be reversed'. This phrase is reminiscent of the Heraclitean paradigm which he references in the 'Second Letter on Harmony', as well as his general sense that there is a secret, occult knowledge which, even if 'bourgeois' and tainted, a 'danger zone', can contribute to 'dialectical love', allowing for 'communications' from the dead. Bonney's poetics, however, is not motivated by this sense of 'hidden implications' behind actions, to which only he and an elite of those with the correct 'mental chemical makeup' have the interpretive key. Instead, actions speak for themselves, much as things speak with the screams of the dead; these immanently include their own contrary, and belie their encasement in alienated forms. What does it mean, given this, to be both 'occult' and clear-minded, both hermetic and direct?

Bonney confronts precisely the question of the involution or the 'turning inside out' of the given, the passed-on, of what is communicated and transmitted, and also what is institutionalised as normal. He does it in a different way than an automatism of reversal. We might apply this method, as he does, to disturbing the 'storm corners' of reaction, some of whose energy must be salvaged. So far, I've been referring to the rejection of a 'system' behind phenomena, and his poem-letter begins with something similar.

What I can gather, from a careful reading of some of Lenin's Notes on Hegel — he's got something in there about the Pythagorean harmony of the spheres proposing a

perfect cosmology, a hierarchy built on scalar realities that justifies social conditions on earth, where everybody is in their place, and nobody is able to question the beauty and perfection of these relationships. Straightforward. And for it to work, for all these justifications to hold true, a fictional body is essential: the antichthon, or counter-earth. Thus, at the limit, the gravitational pull that holds the entire system, of hierarchical harmony together is an untruth, but an untruth with the power to kill. But if this untruth is the site of justification and corporate (i.e. ritual) slaughter it's also the site, magnetic as all hell, of contention and repulsion, which can transgress its own limits until something quite different, namely, crime, or impossibility, appears. For Ernst Bloch, the revolution was the crossroads where the dead come to meet. For Lorca, music was the scream of dead generations – the language of the dead. But our system of harmony knows so well it contains its own negation that it has mummified it, and while we know we live within a criminal harmony, we also know we are held helplessly within it as fixed subjects, or rather as objects, even cadavers, of an alien music. But never mind, just as protest is useless only because it stays within the limits of the already known, so the hidden harmony is better than the obvious. Heraclitus. Music as a slicing through of harmonic harmonies etc, poetic realities as counter-earths where we can propose a new stance in which we can see and act on what had previously been kept invisible etc. (Bonney, *op. cit.*, p. 33)

As argued in the beginning of this passage, the systematic—the perfect cosmology of Pythagoras, long beloved of occultists—is not truly a ‘hidden harmony’ behind phenomena but a social justification, a socially produced totality. Bonney’s ‘gestures’, his references to social phenomena by a kind of riff, might be seen as elements of this, although his presentation refers to its discontinuousness. The Antichthon, or antipodes, in Pythagoras is the invisible sphere corresponding to Earth as its opposite in the cosmological system. It was later taken up by other ancient philosophers such as Aristotle and involved the belief in a kind of reversal, taking place on this invisible underside/opposite. Inhabiting this antichthon does not involve disappearance but speaking, as it were, from the margins, hearing the inaudible and seeing the invisible. Importantly, the existence of this ‘fiction’ is ‘an untruth, but an untruth with the power to kill’; not simply a negation, or non-existence. Instead it is the tremor of violence which holds the system in place; its violence’s latent systematicity. Again, the anti-system appears in its effects, in an ‘Idea’, a fiction, not in objective relations between phenomena, even if violence appears in event. This negative Idea persists as magnetism—‘contention and repulsion’—a kind of force of resistance distorting the self-sameness of reality. The cosmic system’s transgression of its own limits forces

and insists upon ‘crime, or impossibility’, which ‘appears’, giving a sign. Again, this breach of law or this negation of possibility, could be related—first to the rejection of system and law in favour of constellation, and second to the ‘never realised’: all the negated potential of revolutionary events of the past which present themselves as wavering hallucinated limits in the present, rather than simply disappearing. How can we make contact with these impossibilities, to harness their capacity? Impossibility is real: a virtual mutation of the system of the spheres. Yet even negating impossibility, turning it inside out, turns us into mummies, with negation reified: neutralised of any transgressive potential. We ourselves are returned to mere dead creatures—‘cadavers’—who appear almost like dead larvae, only humming with ‘alien music’, never able to break out of this stupor.

Heraclitus appears now: another reference to a figure appreciated by occultists, as his insistence on the hidden has meant his taking up as an esotericist, according to his superstitious aspects. Often seen as a philosopher of harmony, he nonetheless does not naturalise harmony, nor identify nature with perceptible harmony: his intention is more attuned to the negativity identified with Being. In his famous Fragment B123, cited by Themistius, ‘Nature (*physis*) loves to hide’. We make strides into the unknown, contravening social logic, by attuning ourselves to the negativity of the hidden. Nature projects a kind of desire but it is towards concealment, not its emergence and perception; not towards a visible form. Here we might recall the constellation, whose Idea remains invisible. Hiding does not represent a rupture of a natural schema, but a fundamental expression of movement and change. Fragment B123’s evocation of hiding parallels several other fragments, such as B84a – ‘Changing it rests’, which makes the harmony of rest, much like the harmony of love, coterminous with change or non-selfsameness (hiding). B51 evokes a similar conception of contradiction: ‘They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and the lyre’. The contraries of withdrawing and emerging, withholding and bringing forth, are seen as dialectically intertwined. While on one hand, this negates ‘variance’ as not representing true variance, in one respect mummifying it, it also shows its fundamental force, its power. Struggle begins to realise itself, to take on the aspects of visible reality.

Here I want to suggest that this kind of ‘backwards-turning attunement’ is linked integrally to Bonney’s interpretation of the counter-earth, of involution, or the ‘turning inside out’ that Marx is known for. In this ‘backwards-turning attunement’, the arrow of time indeed goes backwards, and we are made aware of the invisible—the past and the future. Bonney wishes to ‘turn inside out’ Marx’s chiasmic slogan (from *The Eighteenth*

Brumaire) of the revolution taking its poetry from the future by proposing instead a riff on the ‘riff’ in Baraka’s short story ‘The Screamers’ as counter-harmony. Baraka’s riff ‘pushed its insistence past music’, becoming a ‘force moving beyond utterance’, and eventually, in Bonney’s words, the ‘counter-earth rigged to stroboscopes’ which could make us hear the dead generations. Bonney’s insistence on the sublime quality of overcoming in *Live in Seattle*, linked here to Baraka’s ‘screamers’, might recall Heraclitus’ fragment B8: ‘What is opposed brings together, the finest harmony [*harmonia*] is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be [or, ‘occurs’] in accordance with strife’. Strife, interruption, struggle, and conflictual composition: this is Bonney’s understanding of the value of the unknown, which can be apprehended through revolutionary hermeticism, although never without self-questioning. What is transmitted from the past, instead of simply in the referential content and the words contained in poems, or the lives of poets, appears in these monads, this rhythm or riff or ‘stance’ or ‘figure’, cut up into interrupted slices of time, like Brecht’s ‘gesture’. These gestures are used to cut through the surface of phenomena and enter the antipodes of an inherently contradictory reality, which moreover utilises its contradictoriness to kill. Rather than mapping the totality, Bonney apprehends its negativity.

Bonney’s question is precisely how *not to* maintain the dead as the dead, as ‘mere dead creatures’, but to actually hear their screams. If heard, the screams are, as he writes, ‘seismic’. Instead of an occult alchemy—a transformative turning of a material into another, and yet a ‘Traditional’ practice—as Jonas seems to suggest, Bonney’s occult gesture appears in this practice of reversal, attuned to the invisible and the hidden as immanent rather than supersensible. This different practice of reversal and transmutation makes him more profoundly open to receiving transmissions from the past, which cluster around symbols, signs, gestures. Jonas’ strongly pre-ordained sense of what communications he would receive—what his poet’s antennae, recalling the Spicer of whom he wrote—would pick up, makes it clear that his is a prefigurative, determined view of the ‘Tradition’. It is not one, instead, like Bonney’s, that proceeds through negativity, which paradoxically remains the greatest openness to the past. Harnessing necromantic power not through *supernatural*—transcendent—belief, but through the very life of things in its social contradictoriness, Bonney resembles Benjaminian practices of interpretation, which bring us closer to ‘enslaved ancestors’, and to the lives encoded in seemingly dead objects.²⁹ Attending to the confusion, the multifaceted and negative quality of these objects—including poems themselves—remains the greatest task of memorialising ‘our death’, which requires no faith.³⁰ That is, not believing that the dead remain alive in another world, parallel to this one, communicating by séance. Instead, we must, after Marx, ‘let the dead bury their dead’,

understanding the reality of the negative, and arriving at the 'content' of death itself within life.³¹ Only in training its gaze on the past and its 'screams' will the revolution achieve the poetry of the future. In recognising this, we also see that the dead persist in everyday reality: our collective death can be made visible in phenomena. The first of these phenomena I've tried to attend to is Bonney's poem itself. Attending to these bespeaks a continual mourning, in which Bonney was engaged, whose negativity, reversal and many-sidedness we might derive from him, which is nothing but the drive to revolution.

Notes

- ¹ John Wieners, 'Ungrateful City', in *Caterpillar* (ed. Clayton Eshleman), no. 11, 1970, p. 107.
- ² All references to Heraclitus use the translations contained in *A Presocratics Reader*, trans. Richard D. McKirahan and Patricia Curd (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996). In citing this text, I will use the fragment rather than page number.
- ³ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 62.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 143.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ⁶ See Martin Heidegger's *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Krell and Frank Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, 1975) for his consideration of Heraclitus. Many in the poetic scenes surrounding Jonas, as in Robert Duncan and Charles Olson (Bonney had taken a strong earlier interest in the latter), wrote of Heraclitus' fragments.
- ⁷ For an explanation of this distinction, see for example Alfred Schmidt, *History and Structure*, trans. Jeffrey Herf (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).
- ⁸ Louis Althusser's well-known phrase appears in *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2009).
- ⁹ W. B. Yeats, *A critical edition of Yeats's A vision (1925)*, ed. George Mills Harper and Walter K. Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978).
- ¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 10.
- ¹¹ Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p. 35. Future references to this text will be in brackets.
- ¹² Walter Benjamin, 'Toward the Critique of Violence', in *Towards the Critique of Violence*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), pp. 57, 60.
- ¹³ John Wieners, 'Children of the Working Class' in *Supplication* (New York: Wave Books, 2015), p. 138.
- ¹⁴ Bertolt Brecht, 'Five Difficulties of Telling the Truth' in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2015), pp. 141-57; Bertolt Brecht, 'The Anxieties of the Regime', *Poems, 1913-1956*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Eyre Methuen, 1976), p. 298.
- ¹⁵ Stephen Jonas, 'Morphogenesis' in *Arcana: A Stephen Jonas Reader*, ed. Garrett Caples, Derek Fenner, David Rich and Joseph Torra (San Francisco: City Lights, 2019), pp. 80-1.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*.
- ¹⁷ See Gerrit Lansing, in Stephen Jonas, *Exercises for Ear* (London: Ferry Press, 1968).
- ¹⁸ Gerrit Lansing, in *Arcana: A Stephen Jonas Reader*, ed. Garrett Caples, Derek Fenner, David Rich and Joseph Torra (San Francisco: City Lights, 2019), p. 12.
- ¹⁹ Bloch, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 3.

²¹ See Heiner Müller, *Germania*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schütze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990).

²² Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1986), p. 192.

²³ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 148, 150.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 321.

²⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 208.

²⁶ Raffael de Gruttola, 'Prefatory letter', in *Caterpillar* (ed. Clayton Eshleman), no. 11, 1970, p. 62.

²⁷ Stephen Jonas, 'An unpublished letter', in *Caterpillar* (ed. Clayton Eshleman), no. 11, 1970, p. 62. Future references to this text will be in brackets.

²⁸ We might note that in this issue (11) of *Caterpillar*, 26 men were published and yet not a single woman.

²⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 260.

³⁰ We might recall the striking title of Bonney's final work: *Our Death*.

³¹ Marx, *op. cit.*, p. 597.

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