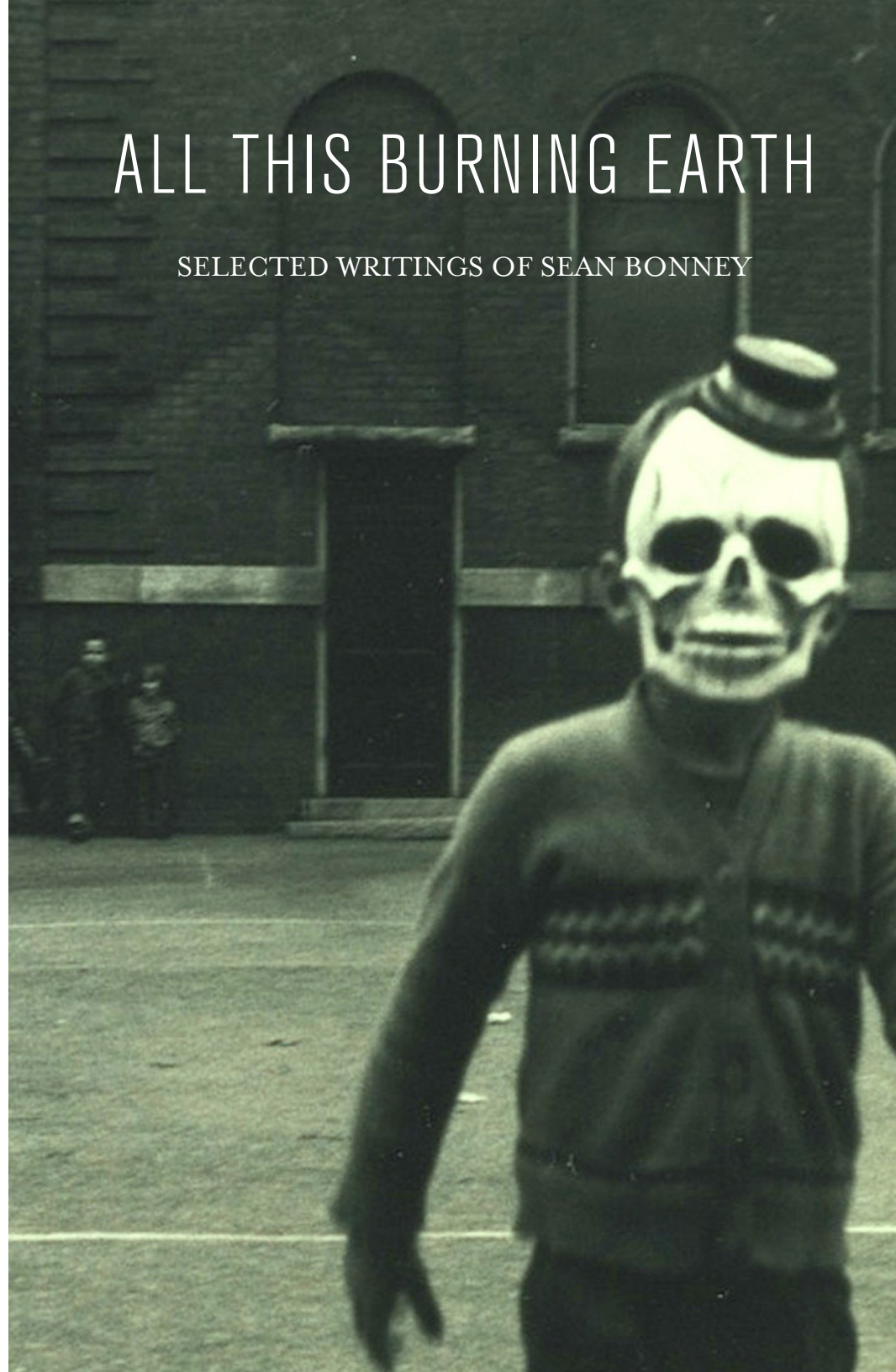


*"I understand Sean's writing not because I know anything about poetry, but because I know what it's like to fight the police". -a friend*

# ALL THIS BURNING EARTH

SELECTED WRITINGS OF SEAN BONNEY



FOR MORE OF SEAN'S WRITING, VISIT [ABANDONEDBUILDINGS.BLOGSPOT.COM](http://ABANDONEDBUILDINGS.BLOGSPOT.COM)

THIS ZINE IS FITTED FOR US LETTER PAPER. FOR AN A5 /EUROPE VERSION, VISIT  
[ILL-WILL-EDITIONS.TUMBLR.COM](http://ILL-WILL-EDITIONS.TUMBLR.COM), OR WRITE TO US AT [ILLWILL@RISEUP.NET](mailto:ILLWILL@RISEUP.NET)

FIRST PRINTING: MARCH 2016

And when they say “we”, they are only trying with their drivel to mold what the people think and how they think it. - Ulrike Meinhoff

“We” the liars. “We” the obedient, “we” the imperial teeth.  
No birds, no suits, no sacrificial spiders.  
This history passes through us like ghosts.  
Various acronyms. Nostalgia for electric colour.  
Black and murderous pink.

---

the ghost of your father  
gave words to the storm  
trapped rain in his songs  
have torn his mouth apart

the rain will not speak of this  
- *it is your beauty, apocalyptica* -

But for you it would be something of a duty in that you could perform in Tübingen the role of a waker of the dead. It is true that the Tübingen gravediggers would do their utmost against you. - Hölderlin to Hegel, 25 November 1795.

# ALL THIS BURNING EARTH

SELECTED WRITINGS OF SEAN BONNEY

[ill-will-editions.tumblr.com](http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com)

[illwill@riseup.net](mailto:illwill@riseup.net)

March 2016

I am sorry  
for what I  
said when I was  
HUNGRY

as then the cities burn  
as ash as simple figures  
as the sky is an insult

name this city

it is a bone it is  
our bones creak  
as pearl fire will

split nets of streets  
or bone it is  
no emergency

*the wealth of the dead  
their dead friends*

---

That looked the sun in the face and were not blinded - Lola Ridge

five days without sleep  
the law is fixed and burns  
we who are captive here  
each night the same figure  
on the same road, stops  
roaring, like a brain  
roaring out our ghosts  
hyacinth and snap-flower  
my ghosts, a river of bones  
my ghosts, narcissi my  
spinning, my laws, stay here  
“evil-doing falls like rain”

★

clock, screams of dead and flying things. The human form, it frightens me,  
its scratched and monstrous aspects; plague clung to, as spirit of love, and  
spectres shriek like starlings in the streets of our devastated cities.

*it is a storm of monstrous drums*

the war has not been declared  
                                  it only shrieks  
the way ghosts shriek &  
                                  ashes are the shrieks  
                                  of ghosts are  
burnt water       are skalds  
of coins & lawful slumber

*and scarlet stars of rotten silver*

★

I want to never forget how I was forced to become a monster of justice and intolerance, a narrow minded simplifier, an arctic character uninterested in anyone who was not in league with him to kill the dogs of hell - René Char

*& this sentence*

*un-pronounced*  
*must not make you bitter*  
                                  *it has made you bitter*

---

there is a law it  
patrols the invisible  
is dark outside

there are comets as  
we decipher them  
as law or radio

## CONTENTS

### SHORTER POEMS

Poem (After Sappho) 9  
After Rimbaud 10  
After Rimbaud (For the Administration) 11  
After Rimbaud 12

### LETTERS

Letter on Poetics 14  
Letter on Riots and Doubt 17  
Letter on Specters 18  
Letter on Silence 19

### ESSAYS

Comets & Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination in Exile 23  
Notes on Militant Poetics 36

### LONGER POEMS

Poems After Katarina Gogou 51  
Lamentation 63

a poisoned lark is shrieking  
its golden voice is leaking

Because we do not exist the years of our birth are stacked inside the shadows of our mouths like imaginary cities or the pits of heaven and other basic banalities.

Say  
those rats. Say those rats have names say you know those names. You do not know those names. Say black powder say a lot of things. And then, a fascist victory, say that. And then. Say it seemed like a door was opened like just for a second and we hurtled through that door or was it things hurtled toward us I don't know and. Say it was just a cloud of powdered blood. Say you know their names and then suffer from beneath those names and live and tunnel inside those names and. Ask what becomes of the motherfucking broken hearted

★

*Avoid melancholy.*  
*Tell a few jokes.*  
*Blow up Stonehenge.*

---

apply gravity to your body  
raw water like butter actually  
made from your body, yes, meaning  
you, we, "a force from the past"  
& on the subject of flowers:

Who are these judges, who made them custodians? Of what? What are these things in the centre of their mouths, that ringed silence, that crushed

---

So anyway, insomniacs or the wandering dead sleep by walking through the department, yeh, through the golden city. Well screw them. The choir, if there is one, is a flock of ghosts. The chorus a mob of disenchanting sloganeers. Forget it. Take some sulphate, some hydrogen, whatever, elements, elementals, mash it all up and boil the invisible

the ecstasy of oxygen molecules  
the mad monks of Westminster

*One was scried with swallows.  
One was split with scissors.*

*some grow in dust  
are not to be picked  
opponents of day  
and night's  
counter-light*

---

every door is not locked - Ericka Huggins

inside the mayor of London  
his gasps of blazing snow  
inside his word for coins  
a million shuttered doors  
of meat and blazing stars  
its livid sentence punctured  
its staggered scrape of convicts  
its corpuscles and laughter  
inside his word for London  
inside our disk of wages

## SHORTER POEMS



*Say they have enclosed us in blank stone. You wake up, you open your eyes, is simple: we have been consumed like blood and water, and our language - you wake up, sibilants and syntax a jet of bleach and concepts. Think stuff up: the enemy is non-material, we are not.*

*Say they have choked us with black sugar. Ask who are these custodians of yesterday's rebellions - insist that it really happened, we are not at all imaginary. You wake up, you open your eyes - there is a border separates us, the deserving, the un-deserving dead. Post no miracles.*

---

It is the stupid practice of our times to complain instead of acting. Jeremiads are the fashion. Jeremiah is found in all attitudes. He cries, he lashes, he dogmatizes, he dictates, he rages, himself the scourge of all scourges. Let us leave the elegising clowns, those gravediggers of liberty. The duty of a revolutionary is to always struggle, to struggle no matter what, to struggle to extinction. - Louis-Auguste Blanqui.

Remember it. You were given laws  
to scratch your childhood, were tunes  
you knew it, singing for centuries  
in cells & gods  
stashed below your bed, fairy tales  
their blue love, from below the ocean  
that stranger, each night, in your bed  
takes off his burning skin, hangs it  
inside his cell, his Egyptian slaves  
his shattered charts -  
remember it  
to take these tales as advice  
an organising vortex  
each sentence stolen  
each word a double claw. Act now.



The law is a mouth.  
Glossolalia.

---

these towers and cities  
these desert plains  
these tasteful burning  
skies, what are they  
what has been forgotten  
in these shanty towns  
these parks and legends  
solid, bright, concealed  
strange and distant  
ghosts, our stark ghosts

*pass the soul of your body like water  
boiling water that scalds forever*

★

It breathes, the law, and those it protects it sings inside, and they are like  
flowers, chaste and tranquil as glass.

It stares at us, the music of the law, and its fingers, they pluck us, as if we  
were strings, golden, and we are their songs, the inhabitants of the law.

And we have no foothold, and we stumble, backward and backward, hour by  
hour, as stars or buildings collapsing, into the abyss, of their hearts, the in-  
heritors of the law, and we sing there, unimagined, in the ice of our silence,  
falling.

And their souls will flow like piss in the streets of the great city.

---

## POEM (AFTER SAPPHO)

the wealthier homes  
have occupied my voice  
can say nothing now, yes  
my language has cracked  
is a slow, creaking fire  
deadens my eyes, in  
high, contorted concern  
fuses to protein and rent

★

because your mouth is bitter  
with executioners salt, perhaps  
when you die, perhaps  
you will flutter through Hades  
invisible, among the scorched dead

may you vanish there, famished  
through the known and unknown worlds

## AFTER RIMBAUD

The wide avenues of Baghdad.  
An attic room, sealed from the outside.  
A pronoun cluster, incinerated by dogs.  
A bitter sky, on a sober landscape.  
Regrets are stupid, and exile is a matter of degree.  
A matter of harmony, or hierarchy, like everything else, and as arbitrary.  
Like a flight of scarlet pigeons, or a few wild nights where your thick skull  
stopped you from getting, you know, really out there.  
A graceless trepanation in the soft earth, the collapse and realization of all  
literatures.  
But what is the accumulation of all human knowledge compared to our  
corporate stupors.  
In a volcanic landscape we were fed to mercenaries.  
In a house in the country we heard the tricks of digestion.  
In an alley in Paris we learned all of human history.  
Constantly speaking of our mythical entry to the world's cities, on a diet of  
medieval bread, we became businessmen, conductors, the entire universe.  
But that's only true from the perspective of one or two out-dated formulae.  
In terms of a different set of harmonics this could be anywhere, Haymarket  
or Kabul.  
And we could be pigs.  
But I'm not going to let any of that stop me from enjoying my retirement.  
It ends in petrol, rags and ice.

London 1873 / 2009

## LAMENTATION

*Our illnesses are mostly political illnesses - Peter Weiss*

*We greet the dark - Diane di Prima*

*in the days of our fiercest anger*

the precision of beauty  
the joy of the whole world

soaked bread in their darkness  
enemies pressed their mouths on us

a snare is come among us  
there are none to comfort us

★

Of music imprisoned, the insulted and truly wretched.  
Of the names of those responsible for the recent massacres.

On the numerology of birdsong  
On riot replaced by birdsong  
Our persecutors swifter than eagles

*They pursued us on the mountains. Laid wait for us in the wilderness.*

And our collective vowels humming like drones.  
The invisible, whatever that is.  
As if it didn't hover above us.  
Announce itself with blue fire.

★

no ambulance  
broken glass. telephone. silence  
I think of my friends as blackbirds  
Marx and Bakunin. always on the move  
the city has been stolen  
always on the move  
murdered by rising rents  
all of my friends. dressed in black  
in silence. antibiotics and broken roofs  
speaking in code. always in code  
plain speech is only for lying  
my friends are blackbirds. are wires  
tight around your hands. your necks  
you capitalist shits. your necks  
my friends are wires. are blackbirds  
Don't let me sleep I'm dreaming. They walk toward me the dreams the  
phantoms it is lonely here. They walk toward me the dreams the melodies  
the harmony is wrong. It is lonely here. The years are pebbles and they're  
blocking my mouth. The years are coins each one stamped with a separable  
sun. First sun Kobani. Second sun Calais. The dreams are lines they are suns  
their angles are vicious their voices are thin they are phantoms their voices  
shatter glass. They are thin phantoms they speak inside our mouths. They  
speak inside our mouths in Haymarket in Kobani. The dreams are years are  
pebbles a system of inaudible suns. Third sun Tottenham. Second sun Calais.  
The harmony is rage the dreams are hunting us down. First rage Ferguson.  
Second rage Gaza. They are thin phantoms they are bursting suns they are  
blasted glass. Now they take aim. Now they murder. Dreams are a means of  
speaking. Glass is a means of screaming your nightmares down.

#### AFTER RIMBAUD (FOR THE ADMINISTRATION)

as our co-ordinates are magnetised, & as our exits have been seized  
we have vanished, we heavy stones of destruction & light -

as our hands are not aristocratic, still less those of the market  
we have come in utter sentiment, some small targeted acquiescence

the angle is fearsome, the order of the day is wretched hope

as your maps are out of commission, we visit you secretly  
we circles of cancelled stars, we flying rags of brutal factory girls  
would cover your face, would swallow in grace & molestation

George Osborne, god of love, we have spurned beauty

## AFTER RIMBAUD

of Downing Street, that assembly of ghouls & defunct regimes  
of the warm November wind, our absurd paupers' memories

outside London it is all geometry, a euphemism for civil war  
I remember our cotton dresses, those ribbons and bows

we skirted the disks of the city, its deserted, dying angles

we were wearing flags and pretty flowers, but our memories  
at several intersections they opened into vast arched domes

of that other life, its obnoxious circles, of relics and animal love  
the horrific quantity of force we will need to continue even to live

★

When you meet a Tory on the street, cut his throat  
It will bring out the best in you.  
It is as simple as music or drunken speech.  
There will be flashes of obsolete light.  
You will notice the weather only when it starts to die.

squealing, yeh, thanks a lot  
you destroyed the wrong world  
pack up your roses, asshole, get out

*On an undisclosed date she was spotted leaving the house setting fire to every cop car she saw. At a synchronised hour she was known to be transporting weapons to anarchist-communist groups in the Middle East, to be working with refugees in Calais, at every border in the world, to be distributing certain classified documents relating to the blood-stained and medieval predilections of David Cameron, Theresa May and Jeremy Hunt. Last spotted wearing one red and black military sweater, one pearl necklace, fists clenched inside the pockets of a somewhat dirty borrowed jacket. This is a note on how to become numbered among the ranks of the invisible.*

I think of my friends as blackbirds  
screeching from rooftops  
murdered by rising rents . we survive  
at random. pissed out of our heads  
in songs in squatted bars  
with pills and needles. to get some sleep  
to stop dreaming  
interpreters. commies. thieves.  
we wake in the same bed. with bedbugs  
with trackmarks I love my friends  
we dream and never sleep  
cocaine into Marx  
plague into Bakunin  
murdered by rising rents. we screech  
from broken rooftops  
I think of my friends as blackbirds  
as wires stretched from city to city  
nailed to the front of the houses  
in borrowed dresses and migraines  
in silence. lines of speed. of wires  
of STDs and bedbugs and microscopes  
we fall in love with killers  
we survive at random

like voyeurs  
Fucking them. They talk about the houses.  
They are breaking up the houses  
They have tied you to the bed with your legs and face.  
Its how they put up the rent. How they get us out.  
They change our names. Elect us. Pour oil on us.  
The streets names. Our names. They burn our names.  
40 in the shade. 40 below. Our mouths are swollen.  
No-one was ever born here.  
A stone. Beneath it, that liar the sun.

★

that there are houses  
on grand roads, we know that  
and we used to know  
in the silence and dawn  
of bottles, and pass codes  
never would we live there  
hating the roses, fearing them  
we knew the address of each one  
we had the blue-prints, everything  
we talked  
minute to minute  
we talked  
wire to wire  
of what we would say  
at the pre-ordained moment  
class vengeance, we understood  
futuristic and ancient, as  
all of history, as  
one click, as  
some kind of message  
left on the table  
like a packet of fags  
in an overheated kitchen  
not even the ones I used to smoke

## LETTERS



## LETTER ON POETICS

Saturday, June 25, 2011

So I see you're a teacher again. November 10th was ridiculous, we were all caught unawares. And that "we" is the same as the "we" in these poems, as against "them", and maybe against "you", in that a rapid collectivising of subjectivity equally rapidly involves locked doors, barricades, self-definition through antagonism etc. If you weren't there, you just won't get it. But anyway, a few months later, or was it before, I can't remember anymore, I sat down to write an essay on Rimbaud. I'd been to a talk at Marx House and was amazed that people could still only talk through all the myths: Verlaine etc nasty-assed punk bitch etc gun running, colonialism, etc. Slightly less about that last one. As if there was nothing to say about what it was in Rimbaud's work - or in avant-garde poetry in general - that could be read as the subjective counterpart to the objective upheavals of any revolutionary moment. How could what we were experiencing, I asked myself, be delineated in such a way that we could recognise ourselves in it. The form would be monstrous. That kinda romanticism doesn't help much either. I mean, obviously a rant against the government, even delivered via a brick through the window, is not nearly enough. I started thinking the reason the student movement failed was down to the fucking slogans. They were awful. As feeble as poems. Yeh, I turned up and did readings in the student occupations and, frankly, I'd have been better off just drinking. It felt stupid to stand up, after someone had been doing a talk on what to do if you got nicked, or whatever, to stand up and read poetry. I can't kid myself otherwise. I can't delude myself that my poetry had somehow been "tested" because they kinda liked it. Because, you know, after we achieved political understanding our hatred grew more intense, we began fighting, we were guided by a cold, homicidal repulsion, and very seldom did we find that sensation articulated in art, in literature. That last is from Peter Weiss. I wondered could we, somehow, could we write a poem that (1) could identify the precise moment in the present conjuncture, (2) name the task specific to that moment, i.e. a poem that would enable us to name that decisive moment and (3) exert force inasmuch as we would have condensed and embodied the concrete analysis of the concrete situation. I'm not talking about the poem as magical thinking, not at all, but as analysis and

night falls  
the central committee, rape apologists, maoists  
night falls

they want to know if I have a television  
night falls  
I'm still kind of keeping it together  
I won't sign  
Long like the 204th International



and we collect little pieces. of resistance etc.  
don't talk to me about fragmentation. it is  
rain. talk about rain. Durruti had it right  
transubstantiation. rain. metallic burning rain.  
red rain. crowbars. the richter scale is  
a calendar. bones piled like rain beneath the earth.

★

40 degrees in the shade. 40 below.  
No-one was ever born here.  
Fascists and charitable organisations  
have made an agreement. They have bought up the city.  
They have poured oil on us.  
They talk about rats. And houses. The contractors  
And the cops, of course

*great procession, the faces. Their lessons are endless. Silence, in circles, our hunters.  
As if we were dogs. As if we barked at strangers. And now they will murder. There is  
safety in murder. Somewhere are angels. Angels have claws. Dogs are everywhere.*

★

music, I don't talk about it  
my eyes. seriously. where are my eyes  
every day there's something to reject  
I will not scream when I die  
Marx Lenin Trotsky Luxemburg  
The Kronstadt Massacre and the dream of Sisyphus  
there are flowers there are colours  
revolvers and homemade bombs  
I'm going crazy, why aren't you  
my dreams my friends dreams  
all these dreams are the same dream  
repeated breakdowns endless weeping  
puking spirits loathing  
every morning I have to apologise for something  
coke, raki, smack  
this is measure  
you and me  
up and down  
and back and down  
we understand everything, those stupid bastards  
private property newlyweds money  
newlyweds money prisons terror  
they have spit at us  
old comrades are dying every day  
kids eyes just get bigger and bigger  
riot cops, UKBA, new glass, the border  
there is a false symmetry separates us  
lets not laugh  
if we don't sign the paper  
they won't be able to act on their decision

clarity. I haven't seen anyone do that. But, still, it is impossible to fully grasp Rimbaud's work, and especially *Une Saison en Enfer*, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Marx's *Capital*. And this is why no English speaking poet has ever understood Rimbaud. Poetry is stupid, but then again, stupidity is not the absence of intellectual ability but rather the scar of its mutilation. Rimbaud hammered out his poetic programme in May 1871, the week before the Paris Communards were slaughtered. He wanted to be there, he kept saying it. The "long systematic derangement of the senses", the "I is an other", he's talking about the destruction of bourgeois subjectivity, yeh? That's clear, yeh? That's his claim for the poetic imagination, that's his idea of what poetic labour is. Obviously you could read that as a simple recipe for personal excess, but only from the perspective of police reality. Like, I just took some speed, then smoked a joint and now I'm gonna have a pepsi, but that's not why I writing this and its not what its about. The "systematic derangement of the senses" is the social senses, ok, and the "I" becomes an "other" as in the transformation of the individual into the collective when it all kicks off. Its only in the English speaking world, where none of us know anything except how to kill, that you have to point simple shit like that out. In the enemy language it is necessary to lie. & seeing as language is probably the chief of the social senses, we have to derange that. But how do we get to that without turning into lame-assed conceptualists trying to get jiggy with their students. You know what, and who, I mean. For the vast majority of people, including the working class, the politicised workers and students are simply incomprehensible. Think about that when you're going on about rebarbative avant-garde language. Or this: simple anticommunication, borrowed today from Dadaism by the most reactionary champions of the established lies, is worthless in an era when the most urgent question is to create a new communication on all levels of practice, from the most simple to the most complex. Or this: in the liberation struggles, these people who were once relegated to the realm of the imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors, but content to lose themselves in hallucinatory dreams, are thrown into disarray, re-form, and amid blood and tears give birth to very real and urgent issues. Its simple, social being determines content, content deranges form etc. Read Rimbaud's last poems. They're so intensely hallucinatory, so fragile, the sound of a mind at the end of its tether and in the process of

falling apart, the sound of the return to capitalist business-as-usual after the intensity of insurrection, the sound of the collective I being pushed back into its individuality, the sound of being frozen to fucking death. Polar ice, its all he talks about. OK, I know, that just drags us right back to the romanticism of failure, and the poete maudite, that kinda gross conformity. And in any case, its hardly our conjuncture. We've never seized control of a city. But, I dunno, we can still understand poetic thought, in the way I, and I hope you, work at it, as something that moves counter-clockwise to bourgeois anti-communication. Like all of it. Everything it says. We can engage with ideas that have been erased from the official account. If its incomprehensible, well, see above. Think of an era where not only is, say, revolution impossible, but even the thought of revolution. I'm thinking specifically of the west, of course. But remember, most poetry is mimetic of what some square thinks is incomprehensible, rather than an engagement with it. There the phrase went beyond the content, here the content goes beyond the phrase. I dunno, I'd like to write a poetry that could speed up a dialectical continuity in discontinuity & thus make visible whatever is forced into invisibility by police realism, where the lyric I - yeh, that thing - can be (1) an interrupter and (2) a collective, where direct speech and incomprehensibility are only possible as a synthesis that can bend ideas into and out of the limits of insurrectionism and illegalism. The obvious danger being that disappeared ideas will only turn up 'dead', or reanimated as zombies: the terrorist as a damaged utopian where all of the elements, including those eclipsed by bourgeois thought are still absolutely occupied by that same bourgeoisie. I know this doesn't have much to do with 'poetry', as far as that word is understood, but then again, neither do I, not in that way. Listen, don't think I'm shitting you. This is the situation. I ran out on 'normal life' around twenty years ago. Ever since then I've been shut up in this ridiculous city, keeping to myself, completely involved in my work. I've answered every enquiry with silence. I've kept my head down, as you have to do in a contra-legal position like mine. But now, surprise attack by a government of millionaires. Everything forced to the surface. I don't feel I'm myself anymore. I've fallen to pieces, I can hardly breathe. My body has become something else, has fled into its smallest dimensions, has scattered into zero. And yet, as soon as it got to that, it took a deep breath, it could suddenly do

Please don't cry. Time will come.  
Bear that in mind. Remember.  
Don't look at me. Don't cry.  
We are gathering the pieces.  
There will be no locked doors.  
No officials, no murders, no slaves.  
Sometimes we'll speak in colours,  
in musical notes. No passwords,  
no secret codes. But remember,  
serious, keep a pill in your mouth.  
Keep it there, these words there:  
solitude, profit, humiliation, suicide.  
That's the dictionary of history.  
When they shoot it at us, fire back.  
I can't lie. Things will get harder,  
but keep at it. Despite our violence  
our addictions. All this burning earth.

★

Fearful we'll abandon our history or steal it. Fearful we'll set up borders around that history. Fearful we'll drive up the rents on that history and talk and talk about the old days in meter and rhyme while the pigs close the borders. Fearful we'll be those borders. Fearful we'll confuse those borders with songs and sit inside those songs as if they were the scars on our veins. Fearful our scars will become a lullaby and that we will turn into dogs. Fearful we'll confuse dogs with doves. Fearful of doves and swans, of corpuscles, of medical robes, of silence and smack. Fearful we're doing what they want. What silence wants. We police their borders. They know how it is. Fearful bastards. Fearful of everything. All of us. Fuck it. Do it tomorrow. No escape from the massacre.

*We are being followed. They are hunting us, are mostly silent. Lines of them, they are hunting us. Their sentences, relatively simple. Our hunters, our educators. It is very simple. We don't mention the silence. What we keep inside our whispers. In our signals, in our silence. As each of their faces change. As each of their cells divide. In*



they are long and sharp I terrify my friends  
I have no imagination  
coins in my hand they frighten me  
every day I cook potatoes  
every day they call my name it terrifies me  
I know they want me to betray someone  
I keep their voices close to my face  
I know they change the words  
I'm frightened of the voices because the voices lie  
they told me they shot you in the legs  
I know they never shoot in the legs  
they shoot in the head  
they extract the mind  
just keep it together, love. keep moving.

*Someone has taken our knives. We go down like the sun. Place of birth. Unknown. They have scratched away our slogans. Colour of eyes. Unknown. We go down like hail and rain. Year of birth. Fuck it. Next time they shoot us, we'll refuse to die. Its raining again. Give me a cigarette.*



it, it had passed across, it could see its indeterminable function within the whole. Yeh? That wasn't Rimbaud, that was Brecht, but you get the idea. Like on the 24th November we were standing around, outside Charing Cross, just leaning against the wall etc., when out of nowhere around 300 teenagers ran past us, tearing up the Strand, all yelling "WHOSE STREETS OUR STREETS". Well it cracked us up. You'd be a pig not to answer.

## LETTER ON RIOTS AND DOUBT

Friday, August 05, 2011

*\*just to note, I wrote this a couple of days before everything kicked off. & more on that later... -SB*

Anyway, I've totally changed my method. A while ago I started wondering about the possibility of a poetry that only the enemy could understand. We both know what that means. But then, it might have been when I was walking around Piccadilly looking at the fires, that night in March, my view on that changed. The poetic moans of this century have been, for the most part, a banal patina of snobbery, vanity and sophistry: we're in need of a new prosody and while I'm pretty sure a simple riot doesn't qualify, your refusal to leave the seminar room definitely doesn't. But then again, you are right to worry that I'm making a fetish of the riot form. "Non-violence is key to my moral views", you say. "I am proud of the fact that I never invented weapons to kill", you say. But what about that night when we electrocuted a number of dogs. Remember that? By both direct and alternating current? To prove the latter was safer? We'd taken a lot of MDMA that night, and for once we could admit we were neither kind, nor merciful, nor loving. But I'm getting off the point. The main problem with a riot is that all too easily it flips into a kind of negative intensity, that in the very act of breaking out of our commodity form we become more profoundly frozen within it. Externally at least we become the price of glass, or a pig's overtime. But then again, I can only say that because there haven't been any damn riots. Seriously, if we're not setting fire to cars we're nowhere. Think about this. The city gets hotter and deeper as the pressure soars.

Electrons get squeezed out of atoms to produce a substance never seen on Earth. Under such extreme conditions, hydrogen behaves like liquid metal, conducting electricity as well as heat. If none of that happens, its a waste of time. Perhaps you think that doesn't apply to you. What inexhaustible reserves we possess of darkness, ignorance and savagery. A hundred million people use electricity and still believe in the magic power of signs and exorcisms, in the nightmare of their lives as slaves to the rich. Don't pretend you know better. Remember, a poetry that only the enemy can understand. That's always assuming that we do, as they say, understand. Could we really arrive at a knowledge of poetry by studying the saliva of dogs? The metallic hydrogen sea is tens of thousands of miles deep.

## LETTER ON SPECTRES

Saturday, August 20, 2011

We're beginning to suffer here. Obviously I've not been getting much writing done. But I've been thinking about the conversation we had, the last time we met. You remember, about Milton? Christ. Yours was such an obvious bourgeois response. Pandemonium is suburbia, pure and simple. The rioters are speaking in perfect English. Its the middle-class, the magistrates, and you, who are all talking some weird, ignorant slang. All of your mouths are stitched up with some kind of weird gaffer tape. Your laboratory is a slum. Sorry. I don't mean to be rude, but things have been pretty stressful: last week the butcher put the prices up even on rat-meat. Today its all he's got left. You know how it is when you read an account of a situation you've been directly involved in, but each one of its constituent parts has been extracted, polished, entirely rearranged? Last week was exactly like that. I got home and tried to phone you, but all that came out the receiver was a complicated, monstrous hiss. I did my best to explain it and came up with this, let me know what you think. Was it (a) you were speaking in a strange new language that had no place in my part of town, or (b) you were speaking at a specific frequency that only particular dogs could hear or use, or was it (c) the static that's left after the tape containing all your reason and superstition runs out and everything's revealed as it really is for one beautiful moment, all brightly lit in shopping mall reds and flickering strip light yellow. I've

humiliation pain humiliation pain  
destroys private property. knows all your music is prison.  
knows all of your language is prison. all of your seconds are prison.  
knows western weapons.  
knows european oceans and blood-clots and fucking shit.  
loneliness is screaming is smashing your windows with boots and chains  
loneliness is dancing barefoot on tables in bars where they hate you hate  
you  
is holding in her bruised and ruined hands a very sharp axe  
is hanging over your head  
is swirling over your head  
is lonely is lonely and loneliness is power is sharpened and bloodstained is  
swirling is swirling



sometimes the door opens I'm terrified  
you are dressed in white your face is white  
you force open my hand place coins there  
I never move never every morning  
you know exactly where to find me  
a long time has passed my nails are filthy

reinvent time. reinvent violence. then  
listen, go at those bastards like the furies.  
only then will you disappear  
only then will you learn the magic  
a tiny shred of childhood and ocean  
one day I will come out from the houses  
a strangers language of rags and dreams  
and the loneliness, the disappearance  
oh god the loneliness. I mean  
what do you think I am  
some kind of fucking cop

★

Loneliness does not meet for lunch in Selfridges  
nor does it stroll abstract and satisfied thru the V&A, for example  
it doesn't understand Beethoven  
or even the Beatles, for that matter  
never gets nostalgic over memories of its mother  
its ribbons its straw hats its oh-so-middle-class morphine  
loneliness is not white  
loneliness is up for sale. loneliness will clean your toilet with her fucking  
tongue.  
oh god I'm swearing again.  
loneliness turns up drowned on the front pages as refugee porn and is three  
years old  
loneliness queues up politely for a boot in the face for black eggs and poi-  
soned ham  
loneliness crawls up from the desert her mouth filled with salt and grain  
is marked out in inches like cattle and real estate  
humiliation pain humiliation pain  
is laughing and is very silent  
loneliness crawls out from the ocean her mouth filled with sand and glass  
loneliness knows your passwords

been wearing a black balaclava for days. From what I can tell, your part  
of town has been taken over by a weird parade of quacks, magistrates and  
fortune tellers, all yelping as if everything that happened over the past week  
was the result of a possession by some kind of evil spirit, and they could  
only ward it off with a display of archaic gestures, vicious combinations of  
letters and numbers. The magistrates have taken on the condition of peo-  
ple, and the people round here are no longer to be honoured with even a  
human shape. Its a curious process. We see it everywhere: in the movements  
of musical notes, of chemistry, steam and water, of birth and death. Each  
syllable is a different tonal cluster, penned in with police-wire and used  
electricity. I hear you're thinking about becoming a bailiff. In any case, I'm  
glad they burnt your laboratory down. Now send me some fucking money.

## LETTER ON SILENCE

Tuesday, August 30, 2011

It's difficult to talk about poems in these circumstances. London is a razor,  
an inflamed calm has settled, we're trapped outside on its rim. I've been  
working on an essay about Amiri Baraka, trying to explain the idea that  
if you turn the surrealist image - defined by Aimé Césaire as a "means of  
reaching the infinite" - if you turn that inside out what you will find is  
that phrase from Baraka: "the magic words are up against the wall moth-  
erfucker". Its going very slowly - hard to concentrate what with all the  
police raids, the punishment beatings, the retaliatory fires. It'd be too much  
to say the city's geometry has changed, but its getting into some fairly wild  
buckling. Its gained in dimension, certain things are impossible to recognise,  
others are all too clear. I wish I knew more about maths, or algebra, so I  
could explain to you exactly what I mean. So instead of that I'll give you  
a small thesis on the nature of rhythm - (1) They had banged his head on  
the floor and they were giving him punches. (2) He was already handcuffed  
and he was restrained when I saw him. (3) He was shouting, "Help me,  
help me". (4) He wasn't coherent. (5) I went to speak to his mum. (6) He  
couldn't even stand up after they hit him with the batons. (7) They knocked  
on her door three hours later and told her "your son's died". I can't remem-  
ber exactly where I read that. I'm pretty sure it wasn't in a literary magazine,

but I guess you'll have to agree it outlines a fairly conventional metrical system. Poetry transforms itself dialectically into the voice of the crowd – René Ménéil made that claim way back in 1944 or something. But what if that's not true. What if all it can do is transform into the endless whacks of police clubs – certainly you get that in official poetry, be it Kenny Goldsmith or Todd Swift. Their conformist yelps go further than that, actually, as the police whacks in their turn transform into the dense hideous silence we're living inside right now, causing immediate closing of the eyes, difficulty breathing, runny nose and coughing. Because believe me, police violence is the content of all officially sanctioned art. How could it be otherwise, buried as it is so deeply within the gate systems of our culture. Larry Neal once described riots as the process of grabbing hold of, taking control of, our collective history. Earlier this week, I started thinking that our version of that, our history, had been taken captive and was being held right in the centre of the city as a force of negative gravity keeping us out, and keeping their systems in place. Obviously I was wrong. It's not our history they've got stashed there – it's a bullet, pure and simple, as in the actual content of the collective idea we have to live beneath. They've got that idea lodged in the centre of Mark Duggan's face – or Dale Burns, or Jacob Michael, or Philip Hulmes. Hundred of invisible faces. And those faces have all exploded. Etcetera. Anyway, this is the last letter you'll be getting from me, I know you've rented a room right at the centre of those official bullets. It's why you have to spend so much time gazing into your mirror, talking endlessly about prosody. There is no prosody, there is only a scraped wound – we live inside it like fossilised, vivisected mice. Turned inside out, tormented beyond recognition. So difficult to think about poems right now. I'm out of here. Our stab-wounds were not self-inflicted.

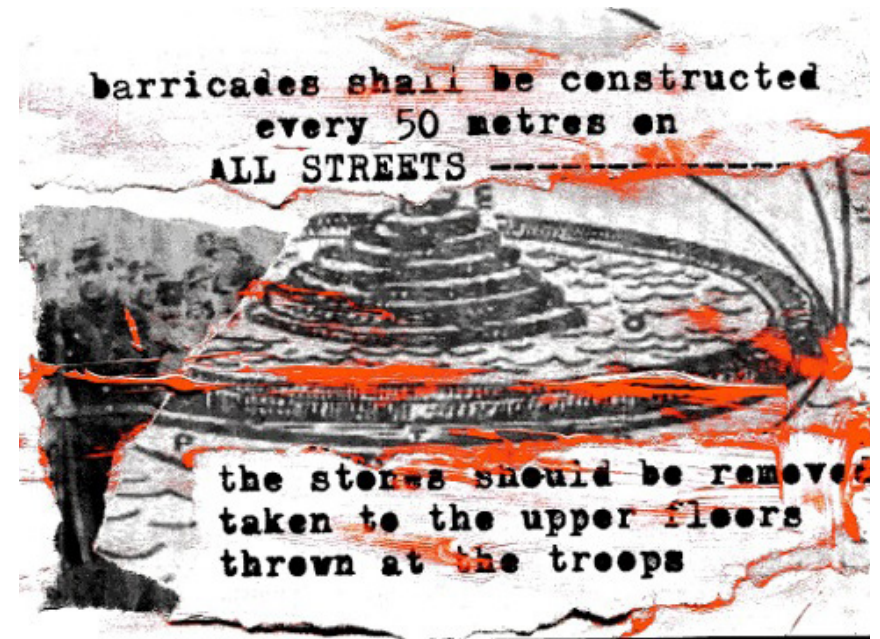


one day I'll come out from the houses  
I did it yesterday  
no thought for anything  
one small shred of my father  
a tiny piece of the sea  
no-one can take them from me  
the city they fucked like a dead friend  
so many dead friends  
one day I'll come out from the houses  
straight into powder and flames  
I did it yesterday  
you fascist bastards  
you pig bastards  
red banners barricades black banners  
a new city a new kind of sun  
one day I'll come out of the houses  
and listen I need to tell you  
don't think I'm afraid when I tell you  
they got me. don't do it. they got me.

and sun and cognac and dust  
and cigarettes and sun  
no, lets not go on about our health today  
pills and drink and snort  
don' worry  
I feel very calm  
there are nails there is hair there are years  
dirty  
the pills are great. the party, you know which one I mean  
impossible to tell whose a cop these days  
music  
the cognacs shit  
no, I haven't heard anything for quite some time  
you know I'n thinking I might want to, you know  
there's a room upstairs  
I want to see you without your pants  
kind of curious about your dick  
music, for chrissake  
you take a solo  
"they took a stick and beat me"  
cognac  
music  
silence  
you pullout your switchblade start slashing  
The Bonnot Gang were right.

There are four cardinal points.  
The first is the sky, it is where they have buried us.  
The second, the earth. There they question us. It is very silent.  
The other two points were recently taken out of commission.  
No explanations were offered

## ESSAYS



POEMS AFTER KATERINA GOGOU



*I would like to spin a eulogy / of filth, of poverty, of drugs and suicide...drugs, disgust, rage.*  
*-Pasolini*

Benzodiazepine. Give me the prescription  
and I will be you. I'll pretend to be you  
and if i cannot, well, I'll tell you about your walls  
the interpretation of the cracks, divination etc  
you probably don't wanna know. give me the paper  
its fine I'll never remember a thing.  
you'll say things tomorrow I'll have said them last week.  
just right. I know explosives. magic I know and dialectics.  
just write the fucking prescription ok.  
I have conversations with the dead

★

let's drink with the unemployed  
with all sun and silence  
with all dust in the sun and silence

## COMETS & BARRICADES: INSURRECTIONARY IMAGINATION IN EXILE

Let every word indicate the most frightening of distances, it would still take billions of centuries, talking at one word per second, to express a distance which is only an insignificance when it comes to infinity. i  
– Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*

Imprisoned on the day before the declaration of the Paris Commune, in a cell in the Fort du Taureau, ‘an ellipse-shaped fortified island lying half a mile outside of the rock shores of Morlaix at a place where, after briefly morphing into the English Channel, the Atlantic Ocean finally returns to the North Sea’, Blanqui tries to imagine absolute infinity, and further, how that infinity might be expressed in language. He wrote his ‘astronomical hypothesis’, *Eternity by the Stars* in the months following the bloody massacre that finally defeated the Commune, and while Walter Benjamin was accurate in describing the book as a final statement of revolutionary defeat, an account of the universe as an inescapable hell, an infernal kaleidoscopic system, it is also a book that imagines insurrection on a cosmic scale, and in cosmic time. A book of shattered poetry, equivalent to its near contemporaries *Une Saison en Enfer* and *Maldoror*; works that get called poetry simply because there is nothing else to call them, or rather this is poetry transformed by its proximity to the revolutionary imagination. Franklin Rosemont writes:

Wasn't it under the sign of *poetry*, after all that Marx came to recognize himself as an enemy of the bourgeois order? Everyone knows the famous ‘three components’ of Marxism: German philosophy, English economics and French socialism. But what about the poets of the world: Aeschylus and Homer and Cervantes, Goethe and Shelley? To miss this fourth component is to miss a lot of Marx (and indeed, a lot of *life*). A whole critique of post-Marx Marxism could be based on this calamitous ‘oversight.’ii

This only makes sense within the context of a definition of ‘poetry’ very different from that of bourgeois versifiers, be they of the so-called mainstream or the so-called avant-garde. In his cell, Blanqui’s concerns transform from questions of strategy into those of imagination, into poetics as a form of self-defence. The enormity of the sentence that Blanqui describes – i.e. a sentence that can be almost imagined, but never spoken – is a counter to and negation of the sentence the judge had imposed upon him. Within an infinite universe, defeat is always inevitable, but so also is victory. The judge’s sentence

expresses an absolute compression of all of Blanqui's life: his activity, his 'literary' production is crushed into the counter-infinity of his reality as prisoner, trapped in absolute immobility, whose guards have instructions to shoot if he goes near the windows. The judge's sentence encloses him, traps him in an eternity where 'what I write at this moment in a cell at the Fort du Taureau I have written and shall write throughout all eternity – at a table, with a pen, clothed as I am now, in circumstances like these.' But what he writes there is the attempt to imagine a universe where the judge's sentence is, if not impossible, then, within the context of the infinite, absolutely insignificant. For Blanqui, the universe is 'populated by an infinite number of globes and leaves no room in any corner for darkness, for solitude and for immobility'. The darkness and solitude of his cell is left out of the universe that he imagines, and thus the revolutionary imagination is also left out, meaning that Blanqui, and the radical traditions that he represents, must occupy a counter-universe, an anti-gravity, a negative magnetism that the thought of the bourgeoisie cannot enter, encompass or occupy. The judge's sentence has occupied all of reality, and so Blanqui's imagination is forced to become the defect in that sentence, an insurrectionary poetics that comes to define the judge's law, and as such make that law insignificant and ridiculous. Blanqui said as much in the face of an earlier prison sentence, in his Defence Speech of 1832:

I am thus not in front of judges, but in the presence of enemies; so it would be quite useless to defend myself. Also, I have no fear of any sentence that you may pass on me, while protesting nevertheless with energy against this substitution of violence for justice, for this frees me in the future of any inhibition against repaying the law with force.iii

Even when captured and walled in, Blanqui refuses to accept that the judge's language can enclose him: the judge's sentence is perversely liberating, the law as it expresses itself within the insurrectionary imagination ignites a 'force', a force that, by 1871, would be expressing itself in a cosmic rage that would make the judge inaudible. Even in 1832, he concluded his defiant mockery of the power of the judge with a threat that anticipated the visions of his later cosmological speculations:

You confiscated the rifles of July. Yes; but the bullets have taken off. Every bullet is on its way around the world: they strike without cease; they will continue to strike until not a single enemy of the happiness of the people and of freedom is left standing.

## LONGER POEMS





shelter and life. Workfare and zero-hours contracts are the poetics of capital. Poetic knowledge, alongside scientific, philosophical, historic, political, militant knowledge are collectively the great silence, the great defect and instability at the centre of corporate knowledge. By virtue of that collectivity, and only though it, they still have their chance.

5. Walter Benjamin, at the beginning of the crisis of the 1930s, wrote of the need for a study of “esoteric poetry”, and of its “secret cargo”. His wager was that the forces of the crisis would enable such a study to reveal the rational kernel of poetic mysticism. “We penetrate the mystery only to the degree we recognize it in the everyday world”, he claimed, “and perceive the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday”. The “impenetrable” exists in two aspects: the invisible lives of migrant workers, benefit claimants etc, and the invisible workings of capital itself, only partially expressed in the lives of the very rich. Part of the intellectual struggle is to grasp these two “mysteries” in the mind at the same time, and to force into view their destructive unity, opening out into infernal history, into hidden constellations, Robinson’s demon. Poetry cannot do this alone, but it has its own way of contributing to the task. René Ménéil, publishing alongside Aimé Césaire in *Tropiques* – an anti-fascist journal disguised as a magazine of poetry and Martinique folklore – wrote that “at every moment the poet is unknowingly playing with the solution to all human problems. It is no longer appropriate for poets to play childishly with their magical wealth; instead, they should criticize the poetic material with the aim of extracting the pure formulas for action”. To extract the magical wealth means that poetry’s intensities can come to match, and occupy the intensity of money. Wealth as Hades, as the accumulated dead labor and sensory reality of history, as the law that fixes reality as conflict, as the “silence at the top of our screams” that becomes audible with the rational clarity of what Hölderlin called “the eccentric orbit of the dead”: an alignment of the planets, the negation of the irrational din of capital itself. The task, as Berthold Brecht outlined it in the 1930s, is hideous, massive and brutally simple:

“we must neglect nothing in our struggle against that lot. What they are planning is nothing small, make no mistake about it. They’re planning for thirty thousand years ahead. Colossal things, colossal crimes. They stop at nothing. They’re out to destroy everything. Every living cell shrinks under their blows. That is why we too must think of everything”.

Bourgeois barbarity makes the bullets of the insurrectionaries into semi-imaginary machines; semi-imaginary in that, to use a Surrealist formulation, ‘the imaginary is what tends to become real’.<sup>iv</sup> Even a failed insurrection has set off an anti-cyclonic ring that will compress, tighten and finally implode bourgeois reality. But how much use is this for Blanqui in his netherworld? For all his defiance and bravery, he is still locked up. His insurrectionary imagination is still only imaginary. His invisibility, in his cell, is not a spectral threat to the bourgeoisie, but one imposed by a reality he refuses to acknowledge. He has been defeated by the negation of imagination and the all-too-real abstractions and vampiric vortices of capital. Benjamin summed up his fate: ‘within three decades they have erased the name of Blanqui almost entirely, though at the sound of that name the preceding century had quaked.’<sup>v</sup> It is the ‘almost’, the almost imperceptible crack in the walls of his cell, which prevents despair. In 1850 Marx had anticipated that erasure, suggesting that it was through the negation of the actual name ‘Blanqui’ that a proletariat victory would become a force that could shatter the imaginary and become a possibility. ‘The proletariat rallies more and more round revolutionary socialism, round communism, for which the bourgeoisie has invented the name Blanqui’.<sup>vi</sup> The name ‘Blanqui’ becomes a trap. It is a bourgeois obfuscation of the real possibility of communism, the substitution of the personality for the revolutionary idea. Blanqui himself becomes the prison walls that keep the revolutionary imagination quarantined, excluded from cosmological history, as well as preventing human history from becoming cosmological. By imprisoning Blanqui, by erasing him, the judge has deprived the bourgeoisie themselves of a name that they can fear, but also a name that they can hide behind. Just as Blanqui represents a crack in the judge’s law, so the prison sentence implies a crack in Blanqui’s name, through which the revolutionary imagination can escape. By intoning his prison sentence, the judge intones the death sentence for the world he defines.

★

Benjamin thought the poet with the most immediate affinities with Blanqui was Baudelaire. The conspiratorial cells that Blanqui operated in, according to Benjamin, were closer to the bohemia of Baudelaire, closer to poets and criminal weirdos than to the organised working class. A more accurate affin-

ity, however, would be with Rimbaud, who more than any other could be called the poet of the Commune. Rimbaud's 'logical derangement of all the senses' is a theorisation of the convulsions in collective subjectivity set off by the experience of the Commune. The senses are not the privatised senses of the official world, Bohemian or otherwise, but a collectivity that runs outward into a revolutionary sensory system that itself reaches backwards and forwards into time, upending capitalist temporality. The young Marx, famously, wrote that 'the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present', and so, for Rimbaud, the task of poetic labour is to suggest methods to bring about the derangement of the 'entire history of the world'.

'L'Orgie Parisienne' is one of Rimbaud's great poems relating to the Commune. In it, he imagines the bourgeoisie re-entering the city following the final massacres of the Communards. They are a parade of insipid and wretched grotesques: 'hip wrigglers', 'puppets', 'panting idiots' with 'hearts of filth' and 'terrifying mouths'. They drink themselves senseless, ignoring the traces of the Commune all around them, the boarded up shops with 'Business as Usual' pasted onto them, the stink of gasoline and liberty and blood. But for Rimbaud the city itself is a slaughtered Communard, and the wounds and the scars that the Commune and its violent suppression has left criss-crossed all over it like a counter-street-map are a 'thousand doors' through which the past and future come tumbling, splitting the city apart so that it is made to exist on a thousand different sensory dimensions, thus keeping the idea and possibility of proletarian triumph forever present, no matter how ghostly. The Commune has even in defeat transformed the city, and 'the sobs of the infamous / the hate of the convicts / the clamour of the damned', that is the voices of the victims of massacre, the real negative content of the satisfied yelps of the bourgeoisie, will always be audible, echoing again and again throughout future and past history in a counter-time to the parched orbits of capital's realism and 'thought devoid of eyes, of teeth, of ears, of everything'.vii

Blanqui, in 1869, had noted that Capital employs a pseudo-occultist poetics, tampering with perceptions of an actually lived reality in order to ensure its own survival even within self-destruction. 'The hate of the convicts' and 'the clamour of the damned' are, like Blanqui in his cell, partitioned off, smoothed

human love into stone, metal, money, information and power (the five senses of capital). The possibilities of statement that Baraka would seek to embody in his poem attempt a block on that trajectory, seeking to show that those senses were built from stolen materials, and that they have in any case been violently limited by the forces of capitalist need. In a recent essay Baraka has suggested that the limitation to five senses was produced by capitalist alienation, and that there may be infinite senses, reaching backward and forward into time "in modes, forms and directions that we do not even know exist". It is at this point that Marx and Rimbaud can be read together: the derangement of the senses, the derangement of "all" the senses, is the derangement of the "labor of the entire history of the world down to the present". Far from a merely poetic militancy, this is a negation of poetics forcing an active cognition, where Jarman's non-cognitive aspects of the city come to determine the content and form of what can be known historically, culturally, politically and poetically. In the preface to *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James said that "the violent conflicts of our age enable our practiced vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore." The bones of those revolutions can also be dug up to cast new light on our own conflicts. James goes on: "yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect historical emotions in that tranquility which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with poetry alone." James recruits poetry for the revolutionary struggle. It forms a collective with other disciplines. The revolution doesn't become poetic, poetry becomes revolutionary.

4. The basic truth of Aimé Césaire's famous proposition – "poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge" – has changed a little since the early 1940s. Scientific and poetic knowledge are no longer dialectically opposed, both have been sucked into the non-cognitive counter-vortex of corporate knowledge, in which there are no senses to derange, in which all is, as Marx put it, "devoid of eyes, of teeth, of ears, of everything". This is not to imply that poetic knowledge, thought or writing has a special value due to its absolute irrelevance to corporate nihilism. It is not "the opposite of money". And it is certainly not, as the fatuous Franco Berardi would claim, revolutionary on account of being a somehow authentic, unmediated communication, as if anything could be. There is, in any case, no more "authentic" communication than the corporate state's power to refuse you food,

tend backwards and forwards into history, zones that hang together to create a new / inverted city superimposed onto the one that tourists, bankers and psychogeographers experience: as Frantz Fanon put it, “a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born.” Or as an early fiction by Amiri Baraka has it: “the place music goes when we don’t hear it no more . . . the silence at the top of our screams.” The secret of that silence is the secret mutterings of the commodity fetish in its human form, the “screaming commodity” of slavery. Fanon, again: “my long antennae pick up the catch-phrases strewn over the surface of things”. The strewn catch-phrases are the wreckage of past and future upheavals and oppressions held together in a violent dialectic which, if you know how to hear, are covering the smooth surfaces of the capitalist tradition with the hollering of dead generations.

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

3. “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present”. Marx describes the smooth transmutation of

over and dissolved into capital’s history, negating their potential as blockages and interruptions in ‘the forming of the five senses’ and ‘the entire history of the world’:

All the atrocities of the victor, its long series of crimes are coldly transformed into a regular, inescapable evolution, like that of nature . . . [Capital] sacrifices with neither pity nor scruple all the martyrs of thought or justice.[...] It does not dare condemn them, it confines itself to concealing their names or their roles, and to simply erasing from history the great names which contradict its thesis.viii

Capital’s erasure of thought, justice and contradiction condemn it to an irreal-ity (albeit an irreal-ity with the power to kill) always in danger of immolation by the powers of all it has made invisible, that is, by the wretched of the earth forever in place on the other side of its walls. In ‘Instructions for Taking Up Arms’, Blanqui engages in a spot of proletarian town-planning:

Barricades shall be constructed every 50 metres on all streets. The stones shall be removed and in the principle streets the stones should be taken to upper floors and thrown at the troops of Charles X.ix

The content of the walls is transformed, the meaning of the street is appropriated. Its matter, its molecules are transformed from a tool for the free-flow of capital, employees, victims and troops into a blockage, interruption and means of self-defence. The barricade uproots the history of the city, stacks up ‘the atrocities of the victor’ into a dense interruption, inducing a blockage in the city’s veins, a cardiac convulsion, the street as missile where each impact on a cop’s head smashes open the cells where ‘the great names which contradict its thesis’ are kept imprisoned, releases the forces imprisoned by ‘the great names’. Those ‘great names’ are no longer monuments, hidden or otherwise, but explosive remnants of excluded history tossed into the heart of the enemy citadel. Meanwhile, the ‘upper floors’ where the detoured stones are to be taken are made absolutely inaccessible to the troops:

When, on the line of defence, a house is particularly threatened, we demolish the staircase from the ground floor, and open up holes in the floorboards of the next floor, in order to be able to fire on the soldiers invading the ground floor.x

The proletariat seizes the forces of invisibility imposed upon them by the bourgeoisie. From something whose humanity is denied but whose labour is demanded, they become a monstrous force whose task is to repudiate the

enemy's monopoly on humanity and history. This is an invisibility in the immediate instant of its becoming visible. The invisibility Gustave Geffroy noted when he described the appearance of the Blanquists in May 1839: 'the revolutionary band all at once musters and appears. Immediately a vacuum, a silence sets in around them'.<sup>xi</sup> The invisibility noted by Heine when he described his walks through the proletarian quarters of Paris:

the songs I heard there seemed to be composed in hell and the refrains rang with furious anger. The demonic tones making up these songs can hardly be imagined in our delicate spheres.<sup>xii</sup>

The invisibility of the 'spectre of communism', and also the negation of invisibility imposed by the Major and Blair governments with their famous prattle about how there is 'no longer any working class', and that 'we' are 'all middle class'. The separation and exclusion implied within that 'we' ensures further irruptions of proletarian violence. If the bourgeoisie and their polite barbarism have continued to be victorious, the traces of their negation, invisible points on the spectrum, continue to be a presence, a nightmare and a threat last seen, in Britain at least, in August 2011. Meditating in his cell, Blanqui imagines an intergalactic dialectics, conflagration and impact and struggle as the way the universe sustains itself, a horrendous vision of mortality and death and rebirth, a metaphoric system of hell and defeat, but one that continues to contain at its centre the endless promise of an infernal return:

Stars are born, shine, die out, and even as they survive their lost splendour for thousands of centuries, all they offer to the laws of gravity are wandering tombs. How many icy cadavers are crawling like this in the night of space, awaiting the hour of destruction, which will be, at the same time, the hour of resurrection!<sup>xiii</sup>

★

In moments of defeat, revolution tumbles back into poetics, just as in moments of insurrection – as Rimbaud, as the Surrealists and as the Situationists knew – the energies concealed in poetics explode outwards into revolution. Revolution doesn't become poetic, poetry shatters itself in the process of becoming revolutionary. In 1929 Benjamin had suggested that 'this is the moment to embark on a work that would illuminate as has no other the crisis of the arts that we are witnessing: a history of esoteric poetry.' His claim was that poetry carried a 'secret cargo', and that poets like Rimbaud and Lautréamont

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

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

We need new forms. New modes of speech.

## FURTHER NOTES ON MILITANT POETICS

1. One of the many keys to the meaning of Rimbaud's "logical derangement of all the senses" is to be found in the title to Joseph Jarman's 1966 poem "Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City", aspects further indicated in an early poem of Amiri Baraka's: "in back of the / terminal / where the circus will not go. At the back of the crowds, stooped and vulgar / breathing hate syllables". This is a city lacking memory, understanding, visibility, history, money or art. "Aspects" of the city, not areas, meaning that these are not only geographical but psychological zones, zones defined by finance and debt, zones that ex-

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

– Adorno

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

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

The “precious benediction”, “crowns” and “sweet odours” which are all of our birthright have been blasted apart by capitalist alchemy, and our “voices of delight” have been occupied by advertising, which can only be countered by the “hoarse croakings” of the poetic hex. But the realities of the prison cell and the police bullet have made poetic beauty banal. Capitalist poet-

were ‘great anarchists’ whose ‘infernal machines’ were ticking away, ready to blast apart the boredom of literary history, to transform the poetic knowledge they contained into revolutionary knowledge.<sup>xiv</sup> In the 1940s Aimé Césaire’s essay ‘Poetry and Knowledge’, published in *Tropiques*, an anti-fascist journal that had disguised itself as a magazine of poetry and folklore, outlined what he considered to be the revolutionary content of poetic thinking:

It is through the image, the revolutionary, distant image, the image that overthrows all the laws of thought, that mankind finally breaks through the barrier [...] In the image A is no longer A.<sup>xv</sup>

In the same essay, Césaire wrote in detail about what that image might actually consist of:

Everything that has been lived; everything that is possible. Around the poem as it forms is the precious whirlwind: ego, self and the world. And the strangest combinations, every past, every future (the anti-cyclone forms plateaux, the amoeba loses its pseudopodia, extinct vegetations confront each other). All the flux, all the radiation. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has the right to life. Everything is called. Everything is waiting; I mean everything. The individual whole is stirred up once more by poetic inspiration. And, in a more disturbing way, so is the cosmic whole.

More recently, the poet Will Alexander described the L.A. rebellions of 1992 as an irruption of forces previously concealed in poetry and history:

America, an incessant nitroglycerine story, where the sun has been historically stored to energize the crops of the ambassadorial slavers, crops, initially grown and watered by the blood of free labour. But during the revolt, a Rubicon has been crossed, and we have witnessed the telepathic artistry of revenge, the molecules of rebellion, which because of optimum social deterioration, have exploded into a metamorphosis of nightmares, where wicker stick thrones have blown up and vanished.<sup>xvi</sup>

For Césaire, poetic thought involves a cosmic totality twisting and transforming into new shapes and new dreams which demand revolt in order to make themselves real. For Alexander, the histories of imperial American brutality have been compressed into poetic molecules that, in the moment of revolt, the moment when it all kicks off, metamorphosise into nightmare and conflagration. Césaire’s ‘revolutionary, distant image’ is dragged down to earth and brought into contact with the dominant capitalist image to the point that two conflicting images of reality are forced into crisis and conflict due to their impossible occupation of the same historical moment, the same physical space.

The poetic imagination, as used by Surrealists like *Césaire* and Alexander, is that which explodes the continuum of history in the same way that Blanqui's barricades smashed apart the smooth flow of capital through the streets of Paris.

'The individual whole is stirred up once more by poetic inspiration. And, in a more disturbing way, so is the cosmic whole.' *Césaire* could almost be talking about Blanqui, thrown back in his cell onto merely poetic inspiration, where revolutionary collectivity collapses into cosmic enormity. While *Eternity by the Stars* undoubtedly is, as Benjamin pointed out, a vision of an inescapable Hell, it is not an inert defeated one, but rather the point where 'Hell wanders through humankind': a harrowing of Hell in reverse.<sup>xvii</sup> The enormity of Blanqui's imaginary system is the enormity of the achievement of the Commune, as well as the enormity of the horror of its defeat. In Blanqui's system, the Communards do not die, but dissolve into a metaphoric squall, a revolutionary poetics. In the most oblique and confrontational aspects of Blanqui's system they become comets, which in his cosmological imagination are always interferences, barricades, revolutions. There is a 'radical separation', for Blanqui, between comets and 'the stellar systems that constitute the universe'. They are 'true scientific nightmares' that are not part of, and certainly do not obey the 19th Century empirical and positivist cosmological maps that Blanqui draws upon, and which he dismisses as being controlled by a 'near-insane gravity', the near-insanity of capital, that has to omit any non-symmetrical anomaly from its system. As he tries to imagine the comets' indifference to standardised rules of gravity, Blanqui transforms the entirety of the universe into a police system:

Their avoiding Saturn only throws them into the arms of Jupiter, the policeman of this system. Ambushed in the shade, it smells the comets even before any sunbeam makes them visible, and it leads them, panicked, into the perilous abysses. There, abandoned to the heat and dilated to the point of monstrosity, they lose their form, become elongated, dissolve and rush through the dreadful pass, shedding slowpokes everywhere before painstakingly recovering their unknown solitudes, under the protection of the cold.<sup>xviii</sup>

The comets are intercepted on a high-speed car chase through the solar system. Jupiter, King of the Cops, hauls them in with its pig-gravity, and hurls them into abysses, dungeons and finally the scaffold. They are burned, mur-

risks its destruction as poetry in a way that is far more serious than any silly corporate nihilism claiming to have "killed" "poetry". Meanings are communicated which risk tearing the poem apart. Edouard Glissant describes this same process, taken out of the framework of the history of poetry and into actually lived time:

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

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

### 3/3

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

- Genet

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

-Heine

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

- Heine

might mean by insisting on his sense that Jackson's writing is poetry. It is telling that Jackson calls the prison world Pandemonium, for Milton talks about the same impossible situation. When, in the tenth book of *Paradise Lost*, Satan and the rest of Pandemonium's citizenry are transformed into serpents that transformation is registered primarily by the loss of language, communication and thought: "dreadful was the din / of hissing through the hall, thick swarming now with complicated monsters" – the rebel angels are forced into a "maddening intensity" of noise, where thought and speech become impossible. Attempts to deal with the necessities of speech and cognition from within a place where they are made impossible is a defining theme throughout revolutionary poetics, from Milton through Blake and Shelley, and via Marx into the radical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. Blake's Urizen, in *The Four Zoas*, tries to but cannot communicate with the "horrid shapes and sights of torment" he sees within the Abyss – ie prison, factory, slum – because his language, whether "soothing" or "furious", is "but an inarticulate thunder". Shelley's poetry is full of a sense of a liberated language which comes from a place so distanced from the official world that it can barely, if at all, be heard: in *The Revolt of Islam* the spirit of Liberty speaks in a "strange melody / that might not belong on earth", while in *Prometheus Unbound* we are told that we cannot speak at all if we cannot already speak "the language of the dead". That language of the dead is, in Marxist terms, the voice of dead labor, capital itself. Most contemporary poetry, both "avant-garde" and "mainstream", is allergic to those voices, and would like to pretend that poetic time lives separately to the dominant time of capitalism. It isn't true. Poetry has to pretend it can't communicate "ideas" because the cargo it carries – to once again use Benjamin's metaphor – is the collective voice of the victims of those ideas. The carefully put together exercises that pass themselves off as poems can only ever be polite facsimiles of the exterior of cells like that of George Jackson, but it can only ever be the flaws and cracks in the surface that really speak. LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), in 1964, his own poetry beginning to crack apart under the pressure of the increasingly obvious contradictions between his aesthetic and political commitments, wrote that "poetry aims at difficult meanings. Meanings not already catered to". Poetry doesn't talk about the world, nor does it create meaning, but rather aims at meanings not yet articulated, meanings not catered to in the currently available aesthetic and social networks. This pushes poetry to a critical edge-condition which

dered and forgotten. But like the revolutionary desire itself, they cannot be destroyed, but merely lie dormant, waiting for the chance to re-emerge.

Those comets alone make it through that escaped the trappings of the planetary zone. Therefore, avoiding fateful passes, & eluding the big spiders of the zodiacal planes that linger around their webs, the comet of 1811 washes over the ecliptic, from the polar heights spilling out over the sun, and promptly circling it before regrouping and reforming its immense columns once scattered under enemy fire. Only then, after the manoeuvre has succeeded, does it parade before our amazed eyes with the splendour of its army, before majestically continuing its victorious retreat towards deep space.

Blanqui references the Great Comet of 1811, which had been visible to the naked eye for around 260 days; rather more than twice the time that the Paris Commune survived. The portentous light in the sky metaphorically marks the always present possibility of a sudden reappearance of the revolutionary forces that the bourgeoisie always like to imagine have been vanquished for good. And even though it doesn't really achieve anything, but simply parades 'before our amazed eyes' before beating a 'victorious retreat', it is a reminder that other possibilities exist that are more or less impermeable to the pull of bourgeois gravitational systems. The August Riots also didn't 'achieve' much, but they did at least remind us of the existence of rage and of fire. For millennia comets have been sources of terror. Pliny the Elder describes terrifying shapes in the sky: 'it had a fiery appearance, and was twisted like a spiral; its aspect was hideous, nor was it like a star, but rather a knot of fire'.<sup>xix</sup> It is a terrifying portent of doom, of plagues, floods, the burning buildings and looted shops of August 2011. The official stargazers of the existing order observe a vicious mystery proposing magnetism far beyond the comprehension of its observers, that could only be explained by the creation of new, and wildly paranoid superstitions:

If it resembles a flute, it portends something unfavourable respecting music; if it appears in the parts of the signs referring to the secret members, something respecting lewdness of manners; something respecting wit and learning, if they form a triangular or quadrangular figure with some of the fixed stars and that some one will be poisoned, if they appear in the head of either the northern or the southern serpent.<sup>xx</sup>

They inspire terror and this terror imposes fanatical meanings on the universe. They will smash apart official harmony, spreading atonal x-rays and inaudible measures. They will inspire hilarious orgies and counter-knowledge to challenge the obnoxious hierarchical astrological systems of kings and

shopkeepers. They predict poison, insubordination, new tremors through the intellectual atmosphere. They will probably raise the dead. Like 19th Century Anarchists, they will convert the divine universe into a shadowy system of bombs and barricades. Their weirdness will be echoed in the words of the communard Louise Michel, on trial for her life in December of 1871: 'I do not wish to defend myself . . . I wanted to erect a wall of flames'.xxi And their wild orbits, disappearing for millennia only to appear again, they echo her great poem marking the murder of the Commune: 'We will return, an infinite mob / through all your doors, we'll return / vengeful spectres, out from the shadows / with raised fists, we will return'. Finally, for Blanqui, they propose the apocalypse itself:

Such volatile clusters, taken to a maximum temperature, would appear to us not as a subtle, immobile, and unassuming fog, but rather like the dreadful jet of light and heat required to bring our polemics about them to an end.xxii

Superstitions, fiery portents that threaten ruling class ownership of the sky, these are metaphors become ideology, an anti-poetic, or versified, system that out of paranoia and a social desire to perpetuate injustice and terror, becomes a network of laws. And like a metaphor, in a revolutionary moment it can be grasped, transformed, its rational kernel brought to the fore. Frantz Fanon noted the same process taking place a century after Blanqui's barricades had been torn apart by the pigs:

In the liberation struggle [...] this people who were once relegated to the realm of the imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors, but content to lose themselves in hallucinatory dreams, are thrown into disarray, re-form, and amid blood and tears give birth to very real and urgent issues. xxiii

★

Pliny the Elder's vision of the terrifying, oracular comet as a 'knot of fire' could fit the whole of Blanqui's universe as a system of absolute compression (his cell at the Fort du Taureau) within a locked down eternity. The entire universe is a trap, an infernal magnet where everything stays the same by virtue of the fact that everything is possible. At best, it is a battleground, sheets of flame and conflagration:

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

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

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

## 2.9 / 3

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

George Jackson works to understand the truth content of his invisibility — the cell as the defining molecule of the official world, which, to quote Marcuse quoting Hegel, is "a strange world governed by inexorable laws, a dead world in which human life is frustrated". Or rather, a dead world in which Jackson has suddenly come to life, and now must gauge what is comprehensible and alive within its noise and maddening intensity. From his cell in San Quentin, Jackson is writing from the centre of the position that some of the greatest moments in western poetry have only ever been reaching towards, and it is through this awareness that we can begin to understand what Genet



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

Once one of these immeasurable whirls of stars, having been born, gravitated and died at the term of millions of centuries, it completes its wandering across the regions of space that lay open before it. Then, its outer frontiers collide with other extinguished whirls coming its way. A furious melee rages for countless years, on a battlefield billions of billions of leagues wide. In this part of the universe, all is now nothing more than a vast atmosphere of flames, ceaselessly stabbed by the volatilized lightning of conflagrations that annihilate stars and planets in the blink of an eye.xxiv

*Eternity by the Stars* is a poetic text by default. Poetry itself is a cell, only possible as the expression of a cosmic trap. In the middle of the twentieth century Octavio Paz claimed that it 'has no other mission than to transmute history [...] the only truly revolutionary poetry is apocalyptic poetry'. Blanqui expresses the bourgeois apocalypse. Everything is predictable: his vision of 'eternal return' is of endless repetition of incident and idea, of line and vowel, expressed as endless repetition of destruction, war and flame. The time-cycle of the universe is one of deep silence, dead rocks floating towards each other, their impact setting off enormous struggles and revolutions that are themselves absolutely insignificant. The universe is accumulated death, is eternal life. The terror of Blanqui's vision is echoed in Rimbaud's 'Qu'est-ce pour nous?', his last and most apocalyptic poem of the Commune. In this poem there is none of the confidence in defeat expressed in 'L'Orgie Parisienne', but only an ecstatic plague-feast of rage, blood, fire and vengeance. The 'thousand doors' into the past and the future of the latter poem are transformed into the grim 'thousand murders' of the apocalypse: the insurrectionary inferno expands outward until everything is consumed and annihilated, the sheer boredom of nihilism, or imprisonment. Rimbaud's poem ends with the Earth melting, and then, in one final line, the realisation that everything was wholly pointless: 'Ce n'est rien! j'y suis; j'y suis toujours'. Even after the apocalypse has reached its ultimate point, Rimbaud's body is still there, and not as some superhuman survivor, but simply the same bored teenager he was before everything went wild. He is trapped, as Blanqui is, sitting at his desk, understanding his cell to be the limit of the cosmos, knowing he'll be there forever, that he is still there now, can't tell the difference between his prison cell and the entire cluster of universes. The stars are nothing but apocalypse routines, the constellations negative barricades. But it is not tragic: if it was, if the situation was truly hopeless, then Blanqui would no longer even be writing.

In the aftermath of defeat he falls back on a revolutionary poetics, a system of metaphors and ideas that can lie dormant, disguised as poetry or as cosmology. He imagines an unspeakable sentence, a sentence that can crush the judge, a sentence that will outlive capital. He imagines an infinite universe that will ‘take its lies beyond the possible’. His revolutionary poetics are grimly realistic in that he knows he will always be in his cell, but they also grimly hold onto and insist upon a utopian conflagration that always exists just beyond the finite bourgeois imagination. ‘There is not one place in the universe’, he sneers, ‘where the disturbance of this so-called harmony is not flagrant at every moment’. Capitalist harmonics are blasted apart at every step by the anti-gravitational anarchism of comets, by barricade fighting, by writing like that of Blanqui, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Aimé Césaire and a million others. These dissonant upsurges of utopian glee may only last a couple of seconds, but that doesn’t matter: ‘the absence of such disturbance would only amount to stagnation and decomposition’. The boredom of Blanqui’s cell is just that stagnation: it contains the real meaning of all of capital’s history, the meaning of every bullshit phrase spoken by kings, the content of every hymn and national anthem and financial formula. Blanqui ends his book, and thus almost all of his writing life, with a statement of unbridled scorn:

At the present hour, the entire life of our planet, from its birth to its death, unfolds, day by day, on myriads of twin globes, with all its crimes and misery. What we call progress is locked up on each earth and disappears with it. Always and everywhere, on the terrestrial camp, the same drama, the same set, on the same narrow stage, a noisy humanity infatuated by its own greatness, thinking itself to be the universe and inhabiting its prison like an immensity, only to drown soon along with the globe that has born the burden of its pride with the deepest scorn.xxv

This is by no means a statement of defeat, but one of contempt and defiance. The bourgeoisie may think that they have triumphed, gloating over the blood of the Communards, but they too will stagnate, decompose and die. Furthermore, their triumph will always contain its own negation, the dissonance and disturbance of revolution, of people like Blanqui, writing manic cosmological fantasies in their cells. The world has ended but the body of its enemy has survived. Even as revolutionaries are slaughtered, bloody sacrifices to the bourgeois god, the revolutionary imagination keeps the possibility of their return alive:

so much contraband. Forced to speak the language of the captor, the captive is only permitted to speak in a way that is absolutely comprehensible to that captor. All of the many things the word “poetry” is supposed to mean begin to buckle and come apart under this kind of pressure. Genet elsewhere speaks scornfully of the well-made poem or artwork: “the closer a work of art is to perfection, the more it is enclosed within itself”. That aesthetic enclosure is, obviously, the counter-prison. The reactionary esotericism of remarks such as George Steiner’s “Celan’s poems take us beyond what we already know”, or Mario Vargas Llosa’s “we remain in the dark, unable to penetrate that mysterious aureole that we feel to be the secret of (Vallejo’s) poetry’s originality and power” conceals the social pain, hunger and rage contained in that poetry. Anyone who has suffered the gross humiliation of being left out of the “perfection” of bourgeois reality knows all too well what that “beyond”, what that “secret” is, and they know it because they are it. Contemptuous of a poetics that is only ever an aesthetic parody of the commodity form, Genet implies that we need to think in terms of a poetry that can be somehow prior to itself, and can thus force that “secret” into the raw light of day.

## 2.5 / 3

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

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

Where Rimbaud also wishes to liberate himself from the “laws, moralities and customs” of the bourgeois civil order, Nechaev refuses the ecstasy of that liberation and bolts himself to the cruel center of that same order. In seeking to express through his person the absolute negation of everyday reality, Nechaev becomes the personification of its basic banality and brutality. The “passion for revolution” into which Nechaev must eradicate his being is only the negative expression of the “passion” for money to which any bourgeois will ecstatically sacrifice their person. Jackson is forced into a more radical position than either Rimbaud or Nechaev precisely because of the forced eradication of that passion. Jean Genet, in his introduction to Jackson’s book, claims that the arid zone this necessary (self-preserving) refusal of passion gives access to is the place from which a new, militant poetics can emerge. Genet says of the writings of Jackson, and of the writings of other imprisoned black militants:

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

Genet insists that Jackson’s letters be read as “poetry”: his use of the word, like that of the Situationists, is symptomatic of a crisis in the artform – a crisis expressed most forcefully in the fact that it remained an artform – that in part arose from the failure of Surrealism to achieve their much advertised synthesis of Marx and Rimbaud. It is an understanding of the possibilities of poetry that sounds almost hopelessly utopian now. The writings of Genet, the Situationists and Jackson, even given the pitches of rage and icy violence each of them reached, are soaked in revolutionary optimism. Victory, as far as all of these writers were concerned, was inevitable. From the standpoint of our own apocalypse such optimism reads, at best, bitterly. But maybe an icy bitterness is just what we need. The violent austerity of Jackson’s writing, and thus Genet’s claims for it, may have managed to smuggle some of that revolutionary charge into our own historical position. The austerity of the language means that everything must be laid bare. Genet notes that in order for his letters to get past the prison censor, Jackson must conceal all of his passion within a language in which the only permitted emotion is hatred. Poetry, the “slandered, the reprobate words . . . the words that don’t belong in the dictionary” becomes

For tomorrow, events and men shall resume their journey. From now on, only the unknown is before us. Like our earth’s past, its future will change direction millions of times. The past is a *fait accompli*; it belongs to us. The future shall come to an end only when the globe dies. Until then, every second will bring its new bifurcation, the road taken and the road that could have been taken.xxvi

9 January 2014

## Notes

- i Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, trans. Frank Chouraqui, Contra Mundum Press, New York / Berlin.
- ii <http://libcom.org/library/karl-marx-iroquois-franklin-rosemont>
- iii <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/1832/defence-speech.htm>
- iv Andre Breton, *Earthlight*, trans. Bill Lavatsky and Zack Rogow, Los Angeles, Sun and Moon, 1993, p.90
- v Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’
- vi Marx, ‘The Class Struggles in France’
- vii Marx, 1844 Manuscripts
- viii Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, *ibid.* For a version online: ‘Notes on Postivism’, Auguste Blanqui, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/1869/positivism.htm>
- ix Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*: ‘Instructions for Taking Up Arms’. For a version online: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/blanqui/...>
- x Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *ibid.*
- xi Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Boston: Belknap / Harvard, 1999
- xii Shlomo Barer, *The Doctors of Revolution: 19th Century Thinkers Who Changed the World*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2000
- xiii Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *ibid.*
- xiv Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism’
- xv *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, ed. Michael Richardson, Verso 1996
- xvi Will Alexander, ‘Los Angeles: The Exploding Cimmerian Fish’, *Singing in Magnetic Hoofbeat*, Essay Press, Ithaca, NY, 2012
- xvii Theodor Adorno, Letter to Walter Benjamin, 2 August 1935
- xviii Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *ibid.*
- xix Pliny the Elder, ‘Natural History’.
- xx *Ibid.*
- xxi Louise Michel, *My Trials*, trans. Mathew Lyons, Commune Editions, Oakland, 2013
- xxii Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *Eternity by the Stars*, *ibid.*
- xxiii Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Grove Press, New York
- xxiv Louis-Auguste Blanqui, *ibid.*
- xxv *Ibid.*
- xxvi *Ibid.*

1/3

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

“Truth content becomes negative. [Poems] imitate a language beneath the helpless language of human beings: it is that of the dead speaking of stones and stars”  
-Adorno

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

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

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

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