

Sean Bonney

Paal Bjelke Andersen

YOU'D BE A PIG NOT TO ANSWER

a conversation

SB Sean Bonney

PBA Paal Bjelke Andersen

PBA What does your street tell about London?

SB London is not tourists; it is not the Tube or Red Telephones or the Queen or rich people. Half the houses on my street have no curtains, you can see through the windows and the people have nothing. We are mostly immigrants and we have no money and the city hates us. My favourite time living here was when fascists tried to march through our part of town, and we blocked their path at the top of my road. We gave them a kicking, we sent them running. Not the kind of thing that gets into the papers or on the TV or in the tourist brochures. I loved everyone on my street for that. Every six months, the Hindus have a massive procession. It goes past my window, I always go out on the street to see it. The music is incredible, sounds to me like late Coltrane—tho I know it's late Coltrane that sounds like them. I've lived here about five years and now, like most people, I live in fear. Gentrification has kicked in, has kicked in fast. The pub at the corner, which used to be for old men, working class, was refurbished. It is now full of rich families and their kids, eating their dinners, listening to something pretending to be jazz, something that spits in the face of Billie Holiday every time its played. Billie Holiday is worth more, even in death, than every yuppie in this town.

I wanna act like Rimbaud when I see them, which means I wanna puke on the pub window when I see them eating their dinners, wait outside the pub door and follow them home, and there's me, supposed to be some kind of writer. But we are under attack by the forces of money and conformity. I don't know where to go. One time, I was in love with London. Not now. I need to get out of this stupid racist town. Give me somewhere to live. That's what my street says. It breaks my heart.

PBA How do you move through London?

SB Turn right at the top of my street and walk for a mile, first houses, then flats, then industrial units; walk past those and you get to the reservoir. And then, the marshes which were the border of the city, and it's sentimental and covered in crap. The other way, turn left at the top of my street, walk past the town hall and the magistrates court and you get to Epping Forest, one of the few places in England you could really get lost in. I thought this morning it would be fun to try and set off a rumour there was some kind of monster in there—some kind of hybrid thing. I don't go there anyway. I think trees are boring and the hippie band Crass live in a commune there and I'm terrified of meeting them and having to say "hello Crass." There's an underpass, tho, at the edge

of the forest, and the echoes are great and one of my favourite times in the last half-decade was standing in there with friends, a couple of summers ago, at four in the morning, singing supernatural folk songs and sniffing amyl nitrate. Outside of this, I support Tube strikes. I consider the automated voices on the bus to be a conspiracy against reverie. Sometimes I still get excited when I stand on the tube platform and the train arrives and it's fast and like a child I say, "bloody hell, I live in London"

PBA How do you speak in London?

SB I wish I was a musician. I sing songs in the kitchen sometimes and it sounds awful, and my closest friends laugh at me all the time. More and more you don't have to talk in London. They have automated tills in the supermarket and automated ticket offices in the Tube. When I was finishing my PhD I didn't speak to anyone for a month, more or less, except to the tobacconist. I didn't miss it, though I guess I acted weird when I started going out again. I find conversation easiest when I'm drunk. I can only say sensible things when they're written down ahead of time. This embarrasses me and is not quite true.

PBA The reason I'm asking you these questions is that I'm reading *Happiness* as both a response to a specific event in a specific place—the

upheavals in London in 2010 and 2011—and to a general, omnipresent condition. The book has two different endings, or, maybe, a dialectical ending: "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," and "THE LIFE OF / CONSERVATISM UNFOLDS / IN A SILENCE THAT / IS STILL / FAR MORE INTENSE THAN / OUR LANGUAGE." Could you say something about the background for the book and its relation to the upheavals?

SB The "silence more intense than our language" is a paraphrase from Pasolini, I can't remember exactly where. There are a number of unattributed quotations throughout the book, where I was trying to draw subliminal relations between what at the time—between 2010 and 2011—seemed like the beginning of a major upheaval, and certain clusters of antagonistic energy within history, or rather, certain energies more or less locked out of history. It's a recurring theme in my work, and one way I get round the problem/risk of accidentally writing a 'protest' poetry, rather than the more directly antagonistic things that I hope I manage to do.

Happiness follows a specific arc, from the students’ trashing Tory Party HQ on November 10th 2010, through the resurgence of the working class movement, the appearance of UK Uncut, the reappearance of the Black Bloc, and ends just before the riots of August 2011.¹ The sequence of “Letters,” which I’ve been writing since then, continues that through the post-riot collapse of whatever movement may

1. Two poems from *Happiness*

Page 13:

mayday. the alphabet was a system of blackmail
complacent, would skate on our regulated senses

“sister, I hear the thunder of new wings”
some crap about the immanence of vowels etc

- (a) an offensively wholesome social milk
- (e) understood fucking as a swarm of conformity. was
- (i) what was locked there was. chatter, flies etc
- (o) a stringent regime of structural reforms &
- (u) well, targets, neutrality. a closed circuit of abstract numbers

& us, locked out. the alphabet was, ultimately, not ours
in any case, its mythological shells, its crumpled octaves &
spectra, zilch/the conversation a hierarchy of

eclipse (as in a universe, infinitely compressed)

our desires lack density & social flame

“our silence is powerful”
“the voices you strangle today”

have been developing, the growth of the far right, and consolidation of Tory power. It’s a lot darker—but also, hopefully, a lot funnier. The poems relate absolutely to the upheaval, it’s what they’re about. But I try to make them also resonate across the history of the left, of anarchism, and of radical poetry as well. I’ve been calling it “Militant Poetics,” not as a label, but as something to distinguish what I’m trying to do from, on the one hand, “political poetry,” and on the other, “radical poetry.” Because obviously everything that is ‘political’ and ‘radical’ can also be taken to mean purely formal radicalism. I’ve been trying to work out a poetics that can

Page 47:

----- here at the centre of the official world, they’re
making a chart of all of our secret thoughts. They know
everything about our cities, our rented glue

- (a) *the fusion of transnational capital with reactionary political power*
- (e) *arbitrary militarisation*
- (i) *a racist mobilisation against selected scapegoats*
- (o) *public opinion’s spectral ditch*
- (u) *a fanatical ideology based on hypocrisy and sentiment*

Its all so exotic, a renewal of sectarian violence: like circus tyrants, they are bestial and tender/like sentimental magnets, they will occupy our territory for a single second, or maybe for months, maybe forever.

Trafalgar Square is solid meat. Dogs.

speak directly, but without sacrificing any of its complexity, or its structural radicalism. Perhaps the dialectic between silence and the political slogan—the “whose streets our streets”—is where the poetry actually is.

PBA You write about your fear. If one is pushed far enough into a corner, the only way out is to fight back, or playing dead, they say. But as you write, the silence where “the life of conservatism unfolds” is far more intense than “our language” and also our rage. Do you think that your poems fight back, play dead, or ...

SB A poem can't fight back, obviously. But then poems like mine—and also the poets who I feel close to in one way or another—also don't “play dead” in that they are trying to talk about the current situation (and there are a lot of ‘avant-garde’ poets who are just going on as before, trying to pretend that nothing is happening), about what it's doing to collective subjectivity, of how we even understand what “fighting back” might mean, and how the language of our poetry can meet the language of conservatism. Because so far, it hasn't come close. I've been attacked a couple of times for the violence in my recent work, but there is nothing in it that is as foul as what you can read in the papers—particularly the *Daily Mail*, but the others are as bad—which are full of

lies about immigrants, benefit claimants and so forth, lies that actually destroy lives. If I could write a poem that could tear apart the lives of a few Tory MPs in the way that their press (which is the poetics of capital in emergency) destroys people, then I could say my poetry was fighting back.

I find it really strange that the most common complaint about militant poetry is that it has no efficacy, and so there is no point writing it. I don't know of anyone who has written a poem and expected it by itself to change anything. The interesting point is not whether or not poetry can contribute to change, but what the experience of social/political intensity does to the poetry. My writing changed after being at Millbank. It changed even more after being out on the streets during the riots. Hopefully, it'll change again. Well, it'd better.

PBA In what way did it change?

SB Firstly, it was the attitude to the work that changed, rather than the work itself. I was talking to my friend Jow Lindsay just after the student rebellions had wound down, and he said something to the effect that “all of our poetry has got a hundred times worse, which means it has also got a hundred times better.” The concern, within the context of a social intensity, was no longer to write a “good

poem”—whatever that means, anyway—but to write something that, in whatever way it could, would meet the current situation in some sense *accurately*. And I don’t mean by that, that I suddenly felt I had to write in a socialist realist style—which would obviously be stupid, merely decorative—but that I felt I had to write something that approached the situation as directly as it could, without sacrificing its poetic intensity and complexity. I guess the funny thing, tho, is that as soon as I found myself no longer worrying about writing a good poem, I ended up writing the poems that I feel are the best I’ve written.

Since then I’ve done a lot of thinking and writing about how poetry changes in the context of social struggle. I’m writing essays more than poems at the moment, tho I’m interested in the way these forms intermingle, the cracks and borders between them. There’s a very interesting suggestion in Walter Benjamin’s essay on Surrealism—to paraphrase, he claims that now is the time to write a history of esoteric poetry. This in the context of Germany in 1929—that is to say, in a moment of crisis, the economic crisis, the shadows of Nazism coming in from the future, and of course, the defeat of socialism and communism within Germany just a few years before. It’s in this context of

material, social emergency that Benjamin suggests we study esoteric poetry, and as a way of coming to an understanding of that crisis. He goes on to say that this poetry carries a secret cargo, that this cargo can be uncovered, as it were. I wrote an essay that, in part, riffed on this. I quoted Aime Cesaire’s definition of the poetic image as a “window on the infinite,” and made the claim that if you turn that image inside out, in the context of a social upheaval, then that “infinite”—the meaning of that “infinite”—becomes the famous phrase in Amiri Baraka’s poem about the 1967 Newark Rebellions: “the magic words are /up against the wall motherfucker, this is a stickup.” The key word being “magic” there, that a social upheaval will secularise the “secret” hidden in esoteric poetry.

Cesaire kind of does this as well, if you think about his readings of Lautreamont. His line about the image being a window on the infinite comes from an early essay on Lautreamont, written in the 1940s, but a decade later, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, his reading has changed, and for him *Maldoror* becomes a work, almost, of rational analysis of capital and colonialism.

PBA In a newly published essay in *Mute* magazine you write about *Eternity by the Stars* by

Louis-Auguste Blanqui, the French revolutionary who spent most of his life in prison:

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.

Above you wrote, "The interesting point is not whether or not poetry can contribute to change, but what the experience of social/political intensity does to the poetry." But in the cited essay, which I read as a poetic, you seem to suggest an—at least future—effect of poetry on the social/political experience as well?

SB Well, *Eternity by the Stars* is, like I say in the essay, one of those weird books that were written in the late nineteenth century. Alongside *A Season in Hell*, *Maldoror*, even Baudelaire's prose poems, or Mallarme's idea of the "book," and obviously, Poe's *Eureka*, it's an unclassifiable

thing. It's prose, but operates on poetic principles, if that makes sense. The book of letters that I've been working on over the past few years is—albeit unconsciously at first—influenced by those kind of texts. I don't know if they can be called poems at all, not even prose poems. Well, some days I think that. Then, other days I think they are *obviously* poems—and I don't really care. It becomes simply writing (and also, as an aside, they are, as far as method goes, influenced by *Maldoror* insofar as, especially in the first run of them, I will collage in unattributed quotations and so forth).

Walter Benjamin saw *Eternity by the Stars* as Blanqui's final statement, and as a statement of resignation and despair. I didn't see it that way. I saw it as a huge vision of the cosmos itself as an expression of class struggle, with comets as the international proletariat fighting against the forces of gravity. Obviously, it's playful. And obviously, it dissolves class consciousness back into cosmic, into visionary speculation. It's a fascination for me. It seems to be a continuation of Benjamin's ideas about the hidden cargo in esoteric poetry. At the moment I'm doing some writing about Sun Ra's poetry, alongside the work of Amiri Baraka, where similar things seem to happen, or at least his net of metaphors can be read in that way. And not in a reductive

fashion either. I think what I'm really asking, or trying to talk about, is what happens to those energies of struggle, of what you were thinking and feeling in a moment of uprising—and a lot of us, in that arc of struggle between the student rebellions and the riots the following summer felt that something really was happening, that we were kicking off big style. And while I didn't think there was going to be a revolution or anything like that, I really did think we had a chance of forcing the Tory government out. It didn't happen. We lost. So, what happens to those energies, those emotions—and our poetry—in the context of that defeat? We can't fold back into ourselves and return to where we were before, return to normal. And if you're not going to just fall back into despair or reconciliation, then it opens up questions of where does the poetry go from there. Like a comet, it disappears. And then it returns.

LETTER ON POETICS

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, ie 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 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 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.

*(Incorporating a few brief quotations from Peter
Weiss, Alain Badiou, Frantz Fanon, Bertolt Brecht)*

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