

Anguish Language Writing and Crisis

**Edited by
John Cunningham
Anthony Iles
Mira Mattar
Marina Vishmidt**

Archive Books

Anguish Language approaches language as a core aspect of the present social crisis. The project engages in solidarity with forms of self-publishing, poetry, criticism, experimental writing and declamation that have arisen in the wake of the 2007-8 financial crisis, considering language among and through the social struggles responding to its consequences.

<http://anguishlanguage.tumblr.com/>

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Too many friends have informed this project to list them here, yet this book is for all nameless friends who have been and shall be.

Edited by
John Cunningham
Anthony Iles
Mira Mattar
Marina Vishmidt

Commissioning Editor
Anthony Iles

Index by Anthony Iles
and Mira Mattar

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John Cunningham

Notes on the Anguished Languages of Crisis

Things sometimes go wrong, of course; I hope that nothing goes wrong today, but we have to allow for the possibility.
– Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony'

'Anguish language' is best kept as an indeterminate, barbed and spiky object to be inserted as and when necessary. Or more accurately glimpsed in the varied speech acts and texts generated by and through the slow, ongoing socio-economic crisis we all exist within. It is far too early to express this loose notion of 'anguish language' as a tightly defined concept to be deployed in the playgrounds of contemporary radical theory. Keeping this in mind, the following should be viewed as a non-prescriptive attempt to sketch the rudiments of a theory of 'anguish language' that is as provisional as the forms of enunciation socio-economic crisis evokes. If 'anguish language' is anything it is the tics and tremors of literary, poetic, (anti)political and vernacular responses to the crises of capitalism, and these responses inevitably shift, turn and change form. These anguished modalities of (non)communication, rage, despair and investigative angst trace out the varied cartographies of how the social crises of capitalism might form and deform the bodies and activities of those subjects forced to survive within them.

While 'anguish language' might equally well be chalked on a wall or tweeted out into the digital ethersphere, work such as poet Sean Bonney's recent series of 'letters' to an unnamed antagonist are exemplary: 'I really wish I could think of something to say that was hopeful, that was useful, that was not simply a net of rats blocking the force of the sun...'¹

¹ Sean Bonney, 'Letter Against the Firmament (No.3)', <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.co.uk> see pp.11-12 in this volume.

As such, 'anguish language' is itself a performative act of enunciation that says something of the antagonism within and against personal and socio-economic crises otherwise elided by more conventional political responses. Even the truth of a slogan such as 'Capitalism is Crisis' risks becoming a cliché when repeated too often and affixed to relatively impotent collective forms of radical politics. The increasingly baroque theorisation of communism might inform certain anguished languages but political antagonism and/or subjective travails are expressed in very different forms from most communist theory, both more and less rigorous. 'Anguish language' is perhaps intent on, or more accurately distracted by, other concerns and is not in itself afraid of forming a 'net of rats' that might be more subtle or asymmetrical than the righteous forcefulness of political discourse.

It's a remarkable piece of apparatus²

'Anguish language' does not exist in a vacuum. It is irreducibly (anti)social in that it serves as both a response and tangential threat to other forms of crisis-laden discourse. The sloganeering of radical anti-capitalism and communist theoretical praxis are not the most central of these other discourses – that position being held by what might as well be termed 'crisis language'. By this I mean a varied array of discourses, the plethora of crisis missives that emerge from work/welfare bureaucracy, the media, 'democratic' managerial politics and the way that these echo around day-to-day life, informing and (re)producing subjects.

² Franz Kafka, 'In the Penal Colony', *The Complete Short Stories*, (Trans. Willa and Edwin Muir), London: Minerva, 1993, p.141.

The modes of 'crisis language' are varied, ranging from the most instrumentally bureaucratic through to the hysteria of the media bubble, to the combination of banal assurance, 'everyman' rhetoric and determined designation of the enemy 'other' that marks out managerial politics. Often the three forms of 'crisis language' work in tandem with one another – feeding into institutions, other discourses, workplaces, etc., producing a whole series of apparatuses intent on managing crisis. For instance, the recent introduction into UK political 'debate' of the 'strivers' versus 'skivers' dichotomy, with the former being the almost untouchable caste of 'hard-working families' and the latter a miscellany of welfare cheats and those unable to rise before 11am. This worked on a binary division, including through their very exclusion those 'skivers' that are to be disciplined, thus making it an ideal, ongoing media meme that also fed back into the very policies it was designed to make possible. Such feedback loops make 'crisis language' in itself an apparatus but does not quite explain the relation to 'anguish language'. With a nod and a wink to Marx, this might best be expressed in the form of an equation: experience multiplied by crisis language = X pounds of flesh.

'Crisis language' takes a toll upon the bodies of those it is directed at and this is one of its essential functions. Prosaically, the very material effects of this language might be viewed in terms of extra work extracted, benefits cut, increase in food bank visits, or the cigarettes smoked at the arrival of yet another officious-looking letter. Less quantifiably, the 'crisis language' apparatus exacts its toll in flesh by helping to ensure that a fervid temporality of anxiety afflicts the subject, an anxious tempo that co-exists with the weird stasis of crisis ridden but seemingly immobile capitalism. What we still might think of as experience is broken into even more fragments as it becomes devalued in the face of both anxiety and stasis. This is in no way to argue for the precedence of the linguistic over relations of power and economy. It is to point to the way language is also constitutive of these social relations in which crisis takes form and that this is the conflictual field for 'anguish language' to act within.

There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body³

The material effects of language were recognised by Franz Kafka, one of the early progenitors of what we have termed 'anguish language'. His story, 'In the Penal Colony', tells of a horrific machine that inscribes the sentence and token of guilt upon the body of the accused by means of a steel harrow over the course of 12 hours.

This seems an allegory for how language, when affixed to the laws of state and economy, becomes an instrument of how guilt is decided and punishment administered. Similarly, 'crisis language' is a constitutive element of a natural history of the body and subject. It is inscribed upon our bodies as slowly and inexorably as the harrow begins its trajectory during 'In the Penal Colony'. If the harrow records guilt and 'crisis language' helps to inscribe the social relations of crisis capitalism then what might 'anguish language' offer in response? If nothing else an anguished language is the sound of most things going wrong and someone, somewhere, registering and recording it. This remains inexorably tied to a category of experience that in 1933 Walter Benjamin believed to have become impoverished through the combined forces of technological war, economic crisis and new forms of communication and ideology. He wrote that: 'our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on a personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.'⁴

No longer would there be the earlier forms of experience where a life connected with a form of life, whether bourgeois, peasant or worker. The cycles and patterns that connected generations, families and individuals were irrevocably broken by greater forces.

³ Ibid., p.140.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, *Selected Writings Vol.2 1927-1934*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, p.732.

Benjamin's espousal of this 'new kind of barbarism', an erasure of past forms of experience in favour of the revolutionary transparency of a destructive experiential poverty does not carry the same impetus today. This might be because while Benjamin could still imagine a clean break through such 'barbarism' that would open into a revolutionary now-time, the barbarism we inherit is now second nature. The contemporary socio-economic *and* experiential crisis seems slow and inexorable, immanent to everything and atomised, anxious yet uncaring. Given this, 'anguish language' might be capable, in its own fashion, of registering crisis in a way conventional political discourses cannot, tracking it from the cracks in the subject and the wear upon the body. In doing so it might in a minor way reinvent contemporary 'barbarism' in order to trace the ghost of the destructive rupture Benjamin envisaged.

Sean Bonney

Letter Against the Firmament (No.3)



Anon. London's Charity, the Country's Cruelty, engraving, detail from *London's Lamentation*, 1641

I know. I'd been hoping to spare you any further musings I might have had on the nature of Iain Duncan Smith,¹ that talking claw. But perhaps we're at a point now where we need to define him, to recite and describe, occupy his constellations. Because to recite the stations of the being of Iain Duncan Smith, as if they were a string of joybeads, and they are, would be to recite the history of the law, if we take that law to be something as simple as a mouth is, and each noise, each syllable that emits from that mouth is only ever and never more than the sound of animals

¹ Iain Duncan Smith (IDS) is currently Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government colloquially known in the UK as the 'Con-Dems', after their various austerity inspired policies designed to penalise the poor, mentally ill, benefits claimants, etc. By comparing Con-Dem welfare 'reforms' to

anti-slavery struggles in the 19th century IDS has recently demonstrated that calling him a 'talking claw' is more than apt. A side effect of his comments being that he inadvertently validates current philosophical scepticism about how meaningful formal freedoms obtained through rights, the rule of law, etc., actually are.

eating each other, a gap in the senses where the invisible universe goes to die, and we become like ghosts or insomniacs stumbling through the city, we become the music of Iain Duncan Smith, his origin in the chaos of animals and plants, of rocks and metals and the countless earths, where over and again he breaks children's teeth with gravel-stones, covers them with ashes. Because to classify those stations, the cancer-ladder of the dreams of Iain Duncan Smith might, at a push, be to consume him, and to define those stations, those marks on the hide of Iain Duncan Smith, might be to trap him, to press granite to the roof of his mouth, the stations of the law. And at this point, obviously, I really wish I could think of something to say that was hopeful, that was useful, that was not simply a net of rats blocking the force of the sun, till it crawls on its fists and knees, screaming like a motherfucker, sarcastic and wrathful, boiling the mountains as if they were scars, laughing, laughing like a crucifixion, modular and bleached. Bleached with the guts of Iain Duncan Smith, of each of the modest number of words he actually understands, such as grovel and stingray and throat, chlamydia, wart. And those five words are the entirety of the senses of Iain Duncan Smith, the gates to his city, his recitation of the germs of the law, a clock that never strikes and never stops, where we are not counted, wiped from the knots of statistics, comparable to fine gold, receptacles of song, shrieking gulls. It's all I can bear to listen to, that shrieking. It blocks out the stars, the malevolent alphabet he's been proposing.

Anthony Iles

Anguish Language: Crisis Literature, Speculation and Critique

This essay constitutes a preliminary response to the questions ‘what is crisis literature?’, and ‘what would be crisis literature in the present moment?’¹ Work on the essay began sometime before *Anguish Language* started as a project. The momentum for the work undertaken around these two questions developed from many threads, all indicating different ways into these questions. These informed the project *Anguish Language*, and through them the questions and material which directed the project have been significantly transformed. At the core of the project are political questions, and questions about the political valences of art and literature. Initially, the questions I had concerning the economic, social and cultural effects of the recent crisis at the beginning of the project were these: we have barely understood the crisis yet and cannot possibly know all its consequences. Each time the present crisis appears tangibly, it is in a different form of appearance: suicide by former benefits recipients in the UK, bankruptcy or bailout for UK and US banks; struggle for ‘democracy’ against neo-imperialism, police repression, precariousness, economic stasis and hunger in North Africa and the Middle East; imperialism or national sovereignty in Ukraine; riots against education reforms in England, Quebec and Chile; exit from the EU for Britain or Greece, each framework for posing ‘crisis’ has consequences and knock-on effects, which seem to run and run.

¹ These questions were prompted by Jacob Bard-Rosenberg regarding texts by Siegfried Kracauer in an exchange on a mailing list in 2012. It is these questions

he returns to in relation to the work of Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer in the essay, ‘History in Darkness’, pp.173-201 in this volume.

What these consequences are will be determined by struggle. From one perspective these struggles are fundamentally economic and material in nature, as they concern the distribution of wealth and poverty in global society. From another, they are cultural or communicative, over the forms of articulation, authority and analysis available or conceivable to feel, describe and shape those consequences and who can have agency over them. The crisis has a material impact and it has perceptual challenges – challenges to the specifics of its perceptibility. Since our senses are our material points of access to the world – Marx wrote that the abolition of private property would entail ‘the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes’ – this challenges sense-perception generally.² We therefore begin, even working analytically, from our *unemancipated* senses.

What is Crisis?

Definitions of crisis have proliferated in the last six years. Yet, no hegemonic understanding has come to the fore; rather, this crisis is precisely characterised by this sense of lack of common coherence over its terms and remains a crisis until these are settled. We begin with the best case in a lost cause – a definition of the word courtesy of Reinhart Koselleck, which was published as part of a historical lexicon of political speech in the German language:

Κρσι has its roots in the Greek verb *κρνω* (*krino*): to ‘separate’ (part, divorce), to ‘choose’, to ‘judge’, to ‘decide’; as a means of ‘measuring oneself’, to ‘quarrel’, or to ‘fight’. This created a relatively broad spectrum of meanings. In classical Greek, the term was central to politics. It meant not only ‘divorce’ and ‘quarrel’, but also ‘decision’ in the sense of reaching a crucial

² Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton), London: Penguin, 1992, p.352, available, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/preface.htm>

point that would tip the scales. But ‘crisis’ also meant ‘decision’ in the sense of reaching a verdict or judgment, what today is meant by criticism (*Kritik*).³

The specific crisis we are trying to examine from within was initially labelled a ‘sub-prime mortgage crisis’ and began to be named as such in late 2007 and early 2008. The economic roots of this crisis, however, go back much further, to the 1970s or even the 1930s. The slippage of meanings around the term crisis goes back even further in time. Koselleck indicates that crisis has an etymological relationship to critique and criticism, and this is developed by Anke Hennig’s text, ‘Crisis and Critique’ (pp.99-112), in which Hennig attempts to develop a contemporary framework for this relationship. Critique’s agency has withered just as crisis has become an ever more generalised term and phenomenon. As Koselleck goes on to say, ‘[in] our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept with its inherent demand for decisions and choices’.⁴ Therefore, crisis is expansive as a term and has expanded over time as a phenomenon. The recent economic crisis swiftly became a global crisis and I think most would accept, at this point, that it has moved on to become not only an economic crisis but also a social crisis, which has provided the consensus for governments to drive through both austerity policies and a proliferating series of interconnected local and overseas police wars. This crisis is fundamentally a crisis of the economic foundation of our social relations and ‘a crisis of the reproduction of the labour-capital relation’.⁵

³ Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Crisis’, (Trans. Michaela W. Richter). *Journal of the History of Ideas*, April 2006, vol.67, no.2, pp.358-359. Originally published as Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Krise’ in Eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Konze and Reinhart Koselleck, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexicon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-97, pp.617-650.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.358.

⁵ Endnotes, ‘Crisis in the Class Relation’. *Endnotes 2: Misery and the Value Form*, April 2010, pp.2-19.

This means that, in the most general sense, all social values are in flux, doubt and are subject to re-ordering. And in a very specific sense, in terms of *value* in the capitalist sense – that is the product of the transformation of human surplus labour into profits and investment to extract more work and more surplus labour time – this circuit is in crisis, there is a disturbance in the accumulation of value upon which capitalism depends. It is a crisis of predictability: ‘all bets are off’. But rather than ending speculation, financial or philosophical, the crisis is the very motor of wild speculations loosed from their normative foundations.

What Literature?

The ‘literature’ I am going to discuss bespeaks a very broad definition. This essay draws upon authors who will be familiar from academic canons of the literature of nations or the more expansive framework of world literature (*weltliteratur*), but it will also present, and attempt to establish a framework for, the interpretation of marginal or minor literature – writing which doesn’t so often find itself studied in the university, or resting so easily in the canons of literary fame.⁶

The axiom that what is contemporary about new literature is its innovative departure from the norms hitherto established for it draws upon early 20th century research by so-called Russian formalists into the specifically literary qualities of literature.⁷

⁶ A term coined by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and developed by Karl Marx to describe an emerging global literature which was in his time beginning to transcend national or local interests. For a contemporary revival of discussions around *weltliteratur*, see Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review* No.1, January-February 2000, pp.54-68.

⁷ See, for example, Viktor Shklovsky’s polemical statement that ‘Tristram Shandy is the most typical novel in world literature’, Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of*

Prose, Elmwood Park, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990, p.170 and for general debates within Russian formalism Viktor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981. The position that each new generation invents its own standard by making strange and new forms of expression was reiterated in more conservative, neo-avant-garde terms, by Alain Robbe-Grillet in the 1960. See, Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, (Trans. Richard Howard), Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989.

Therefore, in this text, we will encounter lesser-known poets as well as ones whose renown is certain, and we will also encounter completely unknown and even unnamed, collective and anonymous authors. Anonymous, as any search in a library catalogue will show, is the most prolific author in history.⁸ An author who, despite voluminous output, can be neither located in the literary history of a particular nation nor contained by such constraints, or proprietorial concerns.⁹

Capital and Language

It is perhaps more appropriate to begin with language rather than literature as the object of study of a relation between crisis and writing. The title adopted for the project, Anguish Language, was borrowed from a popular literary hack, or game, 'Anguish Languish', by which a text (often a familiar children's story or rhyme) is rendered to signify completely differently through homophonic translation. These playful exercises were intended to prove the malleability of language: 'English words are astonishingly versatile and could readily be made to serve a new and extraordinary purpose', as well as the importance of intonation and context in any linguistic exchange.¹⁰

⁸ 'We stopped in Bloomington, Indiana, in whose rare books library I found a scholarly key to the contradictions besetting the world. It was yet another book by "anonymous" who in my naiveté I thought was the most frequently mentioned 'author' in the library card catalogue.' Peter Linebaugh, 'Charters of Liberty in Black Face and White Face: Race, Slavery and the Commons', *Mute*, 23 November 2005, available online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/charters-liberty-black-face-and-white-face-race-slavery-and-commons?nopaging=1>

⁹ The issue of anonymity is explored at length with regards to deliberate the efforts of celebrated writer B. Traven to obscure and frustrate the police of identity in the essay by Neinsager, 'Is the Brickburner Still the Same?' pp.225-235 in this volume.

¹⁰ 'Dr. _____ was right, both in English and Anguish. Although other factors than the pronunciation of words affect our ability to understand them, the situation in which the words are uttered is of prime importance. You can easily prove this, right in the privacy of your own kitchen, by asking a friend to help you wash up a dozen cops and sorcerers. Ten to one, she'll think you said a dozen *cups and saucers*, and be genuinely surprised if you put her to work cleaning up even *one* police officer, let alone all the others, and the magicians, too.' Howard L. Chace, *Anguish Languish*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1956, available online at <http://www.crockford.com/wrrrld/anguish.html>

The assertion about language, in which almost anything can, if necessary, be made to mean something else, recalls Alice's dialogue with Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, in which Humpty Dumpty asserts that 'When I use a word [...] it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' Humpty Dumpty asserts his mastery over language, but implicitly it is language which masters him – his very form being dictated by language. Language is presented as an instrument just as its delivery is opened up to non-instrumentality (fantasy, unreason and contradiction). Carroll's contrarian allegorical estrangement of words asserts a fundamental non-coincidence of language and reality – each are shown to be both excessive and deficient with regard to each other. Language's smooth exchangeability and interchangeability in Humpty Dumpty's speech gives the lie to the actual difficulties inherent in the exchange of non-equivalents. "When I make a word do a lot of work like that", said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra."¹¹ Any extra 'work' depends upon affordances and resistances determining what a body or word can do. What Humpty Dumpty and his author lack in their ludic relation to language is a body. Since it is a body in relation to another which provides the context in which an utterance can be heard and apprehended or misunderstood, it is language's relationship to suffering and experience which recovers it from its presentation as a mere game without stakes.¹²

Reality is a tough scale. There is a lot of moving parts.¹³

¹¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, London: Bloomsbury, 2001, p.114.

¹² Here I am drawing upon the discussions of chapter 6 of Lewis Carroll's *Alice* in Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Philosophy Through the Looking Glass*, London: Hutchinson, 1985, pp.31-37 and Donato Mancini, 'Secretary of Smash the State', *Cordite Poetry Review*, 1 February 2013, available online at <http://cordite.org.au/essays/secretary-of-smash-the-state/>

¹³ Debt broker, Larry T, in conversation with Occupy Student Debt/Rolling Jubilee activist, Thomas Gokey, quoted in Chris Kraus, *Lost Properties*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014, p.19.

Italian economist, Christian Marazzi, stresses a direct connection between developed capitalism and language in his recent work.¹⁴ This claim depends on an understanding of the centrality of language (information, communication) to financial markets and to the new forms of labour which have developed in line with forms of capitalist restructuring in which finance serves a privileged and central role. The relation between finance and the 'real' economy can be plotted onto the relation sketched in the dialogue with Humpty Dumpty discussed above. Finance appears to realise capital's dream of *pure* exchange; it presents a spectacle of pure accumulation, money augmenting itself without mediation – reality's limits bounded only by money supply. Yet, as Marazzi argues, this is only an illusion and necessitates the difficult work of tracing the complex layers of abstraction which dissimulate finance from the past, present and future exploitation of humankind and nature which are the true sources of its wealth. In capitalism, essence and appearance, being and thought, do not coincide, and this creates problematics for both the understanding and overcoming capitalism. This non-coincidence also threatens to reduce language to representation or nominalism. The specifics of these relationships are explored later in this essay and throughout the book. Marazzi's model provides us with an immediate link between the present financial crisis – seemingly related to remote layers of abstraction – and everyday forms of speech and linguistic convention. However, there are qualities to the relationship between the social form of society, production and language which capitalist modernity has definitely intensified, but are not necessarily novel or strictly bound to the contemporary moment Marazzi understands as 'post-Fordist'. It is to these that we will first attend.

¹⁴ "The central thesis of *Capital and Language* is that language offers a model to understand the functioning and crises of the contemporary capitalist economy. This is really a double claim: 1) that the world of finance is characterized by and functions through linguistic conventions, and

2) that the newly dominant forms of labor are produced through language and means analogous to linguistic performance.', Michael Hardt, 'Introduction' in Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008.

Language Struggles Against Necessity

To immediately establish a connection between crisis, social conditions and language, we might say, after Mikhail Bakhtin, that 'language is the struggle against the necessity of certain forms'. Bakhtin argues 'that language is where those struggles are engaged most comprehensively and at the same time most intimately and personally'.¹⁵ V.N. Vološinov, thought to have authored the following text on Bakhtin's behalf, states:

Each word [...] is a little arena for the clash of and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual is a product of the living interaction of social forces.¹⁶

We can affirm and extrapolate from this the idea that language is both a scene of crisis and that crisis in general poses itself in terms of what is 'necessary'. In fact each new crisis poses that exact question in different terms. In our confusing present we experience the consequences of the crises in financial markets as austerity policies enacted through cuts in state spending: welfare cuts, job cuts, 'rationalisation' at work, euphemisms in the newspaper columns, anxiety at work and at home. We can say that language is the place where the tangible struggle against necessity is felt and where those struggles are experienced as both intimate and social.

¹⁵ Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p.220.

¹⁶ V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, (Trans. Ladislav Matejka, I.R. Titunik), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, p.41.

Uninterrupted Disturbance

Crisis is not only necessary, it is the order of the day in capitalism. Crisis, can be understood as an interruption, but it can also encompass the new forms of integration necessary to bring capitalism back to profitability.¹⁷ To assist this thought, of crisis as norm and as disaster, I will draw on two older and rather well known, formulations of the ongoing destruction and disaster that is core to capitalist modernity.¹⁸ Firstly, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

¹⁷ This point is made by Jacob Bard-Rosenberg with regard to Siegfried Kracauer's book, *The Salaried Masses*: 'Crises, where they are not seen as terminal, final and universally apocalyptic, must be understood as the great moments of capitalist integration. They are moments of the reorganisation of society in favour of capitalist relations. They are moments of an intensification of capital's destructive powers, under which are piled high new peaks and abysses of human waste, or wasted humans'. See pp.173-201 in this volume.

¹⁸ 'there is no healthy equilibrium state, no "normal", fully functional condition at the core of capitalist society. Crisis is the *modus vivendi* of the capitalist class relation, the life-process of this contradiction'. Endnotes, 'Crisis in the Class Relation', *Endnotes*, No.1, 2: *Misery and the Value Form*, April 2010, p.3.

CRISIS

- (1.) A permanent state of affairs.
- (2.) Crisis management. Bring in the plumbers.
Plug that hole! Prevent fallout!
But the most skilled professionals will present crisis as an Opportunity.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.¹⁹

It is interesting to reflect that, in standard bourgeois accounts, it is Marx who is normatively conceived as the wrecker, the proponent of total revolution, the satirist and gravedigger of bourgeois society. Whilst true, this is also an inversion, since here, in Marx's words, it is capitalist society which is compelled to destabilise and wreck all fixed things, physical and ideational, in its restless and endless search for profits. We could consider this *catastrophe* as the movement of modernity, but equally as historical process per se. Walter Benjamin:

An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [*verweilen*: a reference to Goethe's *Faust*], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.²⁰

It is in this will to arrest the moment – ‘to activate the emergency brake’ as Benjamin put it in a deleted note to this text – and the destruction which ensues from it, in which we first encounter the idea of crisis as it meets an idea of recording, inscription and writing.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, <http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

²⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 2007, pp.257-258.

The development of new military and industrial technics which destroy bodies and experience at an ever greater rate require novel poetic technics: forms of writing which arm our capacity for experience and remembering of what has been lost.²¹ Benjamin's angel 'would like to pause for a moment [...], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed'.²² This, for Benjamin, is to propose history as the necessity of witnessing of capitalist modernity's catastrophe because, if not, 'even the dead will not be safe'. The production of so much death and so much necessity requires a reinvention of methods of inscription in the midst of so much destruction. Methods which must formally construct themselves against dominant and dominating methods, and re-construct living experience and cognition anew.

A Crisis of Questions

It is commonplace across the 20th century constituted of crises and catastrophes that we find writers in the midst of troubling times and revolutionary events seeking to bear witness, to testify and contribute to the understanding of the times they live through. Writers and poets are tested by their times, and writing is an articulation of, a response to and is constitutive of that test.

We are in crisis: there are, and will be, struggles; fights; divorces; wars; battle; separation; verdicts, but we haven't yet reached decision or final judgement.²³

²¹ Jacob Bard-Rosenberg has recently explored questions of textual omissions and arrested movement in this most iconic of Benjamin's texts. Jacob Bard-Rosenberg, 'Angelic Satire: Benjamin and Marx on Standstill', <http://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/post/120060282167/angelic-satire-benjamin-and-marx-on-standstill>

²² 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', op. cit.

²³ Susan Howe, in her poetic study on the testimony of 17th century New England heretics and judges makes the connection between judgement and poetry: 'A poem can prevent onrushing light going out. Narrow path in the teeth of proof. Fire of words will try us. Grace given to few. Coming home though bent and bias for the sake of why so. Awkward as I am. Here and there invincible things as they are.' And, 'If history is a record of survivors, Poetry shelters other voices'. Susan Howe, 'Incloser', *Postmodern Culture*, January 1991, vol. 1 no. 2, both quotations p.191.

Therefore, crisis is a time of interminable questions and questioning. These questions shape experience. Is the poet's task to simply make an accurate record of 'the day'? Or, instead, is the poet's task to feel it, to make it sensible to others, to transform today, to turn it into something other than a trial? Kansas City-based poet, Anne Boyer, answers, I think appropriately, with further questions, after a fragment by Walt Whitman:

What is the direct trial that is today?²⁴ Is it the grim work of mimesis, the paralysis of speculation, the soft disappointment of prefiguration? Is it the cruel history of enlightenment or the crueler history of romanticism or the cruellest history of modernism? Is it to end the 20th century or end the 21st century or the end of all centuries and pseudo-cyclical time?

Is it the trial of survival? Is it austerity? Is it state violence? Is it wage labour? Is it reproductive labour? Is it the furnace of affliction? Is it the womb of fire? Is it art, culture, capital, borders, getting past borders? Is it how to collapse a structure that we know will fall on our own heads?

[...]

²⁴ Whitman's passage reads: 'The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is to-day. If he does not flood himself with the immediate age as with vast oceanic tides [...] and if he does not attract his own land body and soul to himself, and hang on its neck with incomparable love and plunge his semitic muscle into its merits and demerits [...] and if he be not himself the age transfigured [...] and if to him is not opened the eternity which gives similitude to all periods and locations and processes and animate and inanimate

forms, and which is the bond of time, and rises up from its inconceivable vagueness and infiniteness in the swimming shape of to-day, and is held by the ductile anchors of life, and makes the present spot the passage from what was to what shall be, and commits itself to the representation of this wave of an hour and this one of the sixty beautiful children of the wave – let him merge in the general run and wait his development'. Walt Whitman, 'Preface to *Leaves of Grass*', in *Leaves of Grass*, Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1855.

Is it memorializing an hour of pain, two hours of pleasure, eight hours of boredom, each night of worry, fifteen days of resistance, a decade of friendship, twenty minutes of assault, a dream in which our atomization ceases, a geography we imagine in which our care could multiply? Does it send new ships, to seek what new feeling can be felt? Is it gymnastic? Is it in a startling cadence? Is it rhetorical? Does it take the form of inquiry? Does it throb with live interrogation?²⁵

What is implied by this question? Why is the poet on trial?²⁶

²⁵ Anne Boyer, *Questions for Poets*, self-published pamphlet distributed at Historical Materialism New York, 2013. See pp.113-124 in this volume.

²⁶ Boyer's reference to the 'trial of the poet' and the question of regulation and of judgement recalls a dialogue in Plato's *Laws* between a lawmaker and poets seeking admission to his city, in which the lawmaker addresses the poets as 'best of strangers...'. The lawmaker proceeds to an unusual analogy, between poetry and law – 'We also according to our ability are tragic poets, and our tragedy is the best and noblest; for our whole state is an imitation of the best and noblest life, which we affirm to be the very truth of tragedy. You are poets and we are poets... rivals and antagonists in the noblest of dramas...'. Plato demotes poetry to a position both beneath the law and exiled from the city because it 'represents appearance rather than truth, and nourishes feelings rather than their reason'. Poetry is therefore an antagonist to law and to the perfect state (some would say to all states). It is a product of we know not what. 'In the Socratic dialogues, then, contain no aesthetics proper, for neither the structure of Plato's cosmos nor the

pattern of his dialectic permits us to consider poetry as poetry – as a special kind of product having its own criteria and reason for being.' M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1971, p.9. The motif also appears in the Arab world: 'And the poets, – It is those straying in Evil, who follow them: Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley? – And that they say what they practice not?' Cited by Habib Tengour, *Exile Is My Trade: A Habib Tengour Reader*, Cambridge: Commonwealth Books, 2012, p.275. Quoted in Howard Slater, 'Lotta Poetica', *Mute*, 6 November 2013 available online at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/lotta-poetica>. We could also think through this organisation of the senses and the polis – the city and the proper place and form for citizens' speech – in terms of the production of specific modes of working class speech and subsequently of genres of literature through a judicial apparatus. In this light see Anthony Iles & Tom Roberts, *All Knees and Elbows of Susceptibility and Refusal*, London and Glasgow: Strickland Press, Transmission and Mute Publishing, 2012, pp.183-217.

So many questions, and only answers which take the form of further questions.²⁷

Boyer's second contribution to this book hones in on the confinement of young girls in reformatory institutions. In turn, this account is connected to a film made by Ulrike Meinhof, *Bambule*, which takes the form of a fictionalised documentary about revolt by teenage girls in a reformatory in Berlin in the early 1970s. Meinhof's film and Boyer's text similarly concern the making of a collective subject and a vehicular language for its extension in constricted circumstances:

It was us!

Us, us as a lexicon! Us, us on the run! Getting the fuck out of there was our slander! It was us! We yell a lot so what just happened can happen again!²⁸

Language and discourse become tools of revolt and also a means of conveying revolt. Shouts, 'yells', constitute language on the threshold of discernibility as units of language. They do not cling to a particular speaker, suggesting such language in anguish as a moment of collective articulation, organising and escape. The text therefore runs together and layers several crises – the implication of crisis wherever any human being is confined; Boyer's experience of forcing a crisis upon an institution of confinement; Meinhof's experience of staging such a crisis; and Germany's emergency brought on by the Red Army Faction whose ranks Meinhof famously joined immediately after making *Bambule*.

²⁷ 'Every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye. If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions.'

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, (Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), London & New York: Continuum, 2004, p.6.

²⁸ Anne Boyer, 'Bambule', pp.163-172 in this volume.

This layering of several crises, and modes of speech, relates to Marina Vishmidt's project, documented in this book, which used the site of the Moabit area in Berlin, where our initial seminar took place, to explore the history of confinement and escape.²⁹ The site for our initial organising colloquy ZK/U, a former train depot become cultural centre in Moabit, is marked by persecution-borne exile (French Huguenots), industry, disinvestment, imprisonment (Moabit Prison), transportation-genocide (Putlitzbrücke S-Bahn station) and national-political division by borders (the Berlin wall). Another mode of relating to the site was staged by Martin Howse's performance: *Worm-Crypt*, mining into the earth under our very feet and uncovering or recovering language from below.³⁰ Our crises consist in this palimpsest of prior crises, the sedimentations of revolutions, counter-revolutions and past exploitation ground up as so much matter and so many oppressive social relations. This is the layering, of nature as the history of the separation of people from their products and capacities, and history as the separation of nature from its powers of communicability, which Howse and Vishmidt's experiments attempted to bore down into.

Trouble Language

Crisis is a state of irresolution, it is troubling. We will continue to see how this irresolvable state troubles language. Our times feel decisive, but what is it in them which will be decisive? Can we know? What sort of knowing of this moment is possible?

In the revolutionary Russia of the 1910s and 1920s Viktor Shklovsky defined art and literature as a special, but fragile and contingent, kind of knowledge:

in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make the stone stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition.

²⁹ Marina Vishmidt, 'Plan for an Activity in Mind', pp.217-224 in this volume.

³⁰ Martin Howse, 'Worm Crypt', pp.211-216 in this volume.

By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious’. The perceptual process in art has a purpose all of its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the making of a thing. The artefact itself is quite unimportant.³¹

This helps us sharply formulate a number of important axioms:

1. That art has to do with sensation, *feeling* – in Boyer’s words ‘to seek what new feeling can be felt.’
2. That this responds to a lack of feeling or a blockage to feeling fully – we might call it habitual or ‘habituated perception’, or even, problematically, alienation.
3. In art, purpose is at stake, but it is not purpose as we know it.
4. Art is process, and also a means of experiencing process.
5. Art makes a product – an artefact – but this product is not the important thing.

Language is Like a Graveyard

Shklovsky’s formulation of a framework amidst which new interpretations of prose literature could be made has a direct relation to crisis – the crisis of the First World War and following the great upheaval of revolts and revolutions in Europe – specifically the 1917 revolution in Russia. Moreover, this work began not only as a framework for interpretation, but as a framework for creation of new forms in language – for Shklovsky that new language was futurism, expressed in a text titled ‘The Resurrection of the Word’ (1914):

³¹ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Device’, (translation modified), from *Theory of Prose*, (Trans. Benjamin Sher), Elmwood, IL and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009, p.6.

The most ancient poetic creation of man was the creation of words. Now words are dead, and language is like a graveyard, but an image was once alive in the newly-born word. Every word is basically a trope. For example *mesyats* ['moon'; 'month']: the original meaning of this word was 'measurer' (Russ. *Meritel'*); grief (Russ. *Goryeh, pechal'*); cf. *goret'* = to burn, *pech* = to bake) and sorrow meant that which burns and scorches; the word '*enfant*' (just like the old Russian '*otrok*' ['boy'; 'child'] as well) in a literal translation means; not speaking. As many such examples as there are words in language could be adduced. And often enough, when you get through to the image which is now lost and effaced, but once embedded at the basis of the word, then you are struck by its beauty – by a beauty which existed once and is now gone.³²

According to Shklovsky, literature does not pertain to a writer's intention, expression, nor to simple mimesis. He says,

Art processes the ethics and world view of a writer and liberates itself from his original intention. Things change when they land in a book.³³

If authors are the sites that register the pressures time on their bodies and minds, it is not the case that this is what is expressed, nor do they necessarily have a say in what is in the writing. Rather art processes them, their views and 'things change'. Therefore, we can trouble the relationship of writing to realism. There is no necessarily photographic or indexical transmission of the experience of reality into written form, but certain determinations do impress themselves on the *work*.

³² Viktor Shklovsky, 'Resurrection of the Word', (1914), Eds. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, *Russian Formalism: a collection of articles and texts in translation*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973, pp.41-47.

³³ Viktor Shklovsky, 'On the Freedom of Art', *Third Factory*, (Trans. Richard Sheldon), Elmwood, IL and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002, p.52.

How does economic crisis coincide with ‘literature’? On which plane do the two meet and begin to shape each other? Many would assume the two have nothing to do with each other, yet a book is a commodity, its material consistency is decided not by the artist’s imagination, but by the paper, glue, bookbinding and printing industries. Its dimensions are the work of history, and economic pressures bear strongly upon its shape, size, material and quantity. As Shklovsky writes, ‘The dimensions of a book have always been dictated to an author.’³⁴

For Susan Howe, this makes it possible to call into question a difference between the book’s material form and mode of distribution, and the core of its autonomy from its author: ‘A printed book enters social and economic networks of distribution. Does the printing modify an author’s intention, or does a text develop itself? Why do certain works go on saying something else?’³⁵

An account of some of the connections and contradictions between literary value, its material manufacture and its toxic economic other is sketched in Nanni Balestrini’s preface, ‘Letter to My Unsuspecting, Peaceable Reader’ (pp.285-288). There is insufficient time in this essay to explore fully the question of language and its relationship to a crisis of publishing in full, but this would entail an account of the introduction of new technologies, displacing and devaluing older ones – both modes of work and their living bearers (workers) – and how the production and reception of words are shaped by the changing circumstances and material qualities of their distribution.

Unity as Disintegration

The consideration of the relationship between literature and the economic or language and money has long been an area of focus for modernist and postmodernist literary criticism. After György Lukács, who had argued that both Thomas Mann and Honoré de Balzac’s realism expressed the social contradictions of their times (regardless

³⁴ Ibid., p.8.

³⁵ Susan Howe, ‘Incloser’, op. cit., p.2.

of their respective and opposed political positions), successive critics have attempted to relate literary form to society's economic form.³⁶ Key to such debates have been questions of realism and narrative, with an emphasis upon the novel's ability to express totality – the systematic unity characteristic of developed capitalism. Yet, if for Lukács, capitalism in its “normal” functioning operates as differentiated sub-systems that is experienced as a unity [...] capitalism in crisis functions as a unity experienced as disintegration', the form which can best express this state might be neither a unity, nor a narrative.³⁷ Though many have attempted to apply these insights to the contemporary novel, there are good reasons to believe that rather than novels, this crisis has instead brought newly improvised forms to the fore. Whether these may be interpreted as part of a movement of supersession or as a temporary holding position appropriate to crisis as a moment of both suspension and transition, it is too early to say, but just as economic commentators have drawn parallels between the great crashes and depression of the 1930s and the present crisis, so have discussions around the economic, literature and form.

A Literature of Fact

In a related, but very different, formulation to that of Shklovsky, about the possible new relationships of literature to the social field under socialist conditions, Sergei Tretiakov in 1929 made an affirmative proposal for a new realism – factography, or the literature of fact:

We urgently need books about our economic resources, about objects made by people, and about people that make objects. Our politics grow out of economics, and there is not a single second in a person's day uninvolved in economics or politics.

³⁶ Frederic Jameson would be the classic case in point here. However, an example of a deep history of this relationship stretching back to antiquity is facilitated by Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999.

³⁷ Benjamin Noys, 'Toxic Money and Collapsing Value: The Postmodern Novel and the Aesthetics of Financial Crisis', unpublished paper, 2014.

Books such as *The Forest, Bread, Coal, Iron, Flax, Cotton, Paper, The Locomotive, and The Factory* have not been written. We need them, and it is only through the 'biography of the object' that they can be adequately realized.

Furthermore, once we run a human along the narrative conveyor belt like an object, he will appear before us in a new light and in his full worth. But that can happen only after we have reoriented the reception practices of readers raised on *belles lettres* toward a literature structured according to the method of the 'biography of the object'.³⁸

Such enthusiasm for a literature bound to economics, of which Tretiakov's is only one example, was processed into a state of deflation and satire by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Tretiakov and Mayakovsky express exactly the traditional tension between realist representation, collective codes, objectivity and mimesis on one hand and individualism, particularity, formal mannerism and subjectivity on the other, here mediated by new technics and a new vast collective subject: the Russian State. After basic capitalist market conditions were re-introduced in the Soviet Union under the New Economic Plan, the poet pondered the relationship of class politics and poetry to the needs of the economic form of value:

Citizen tax collector!

Forgive my bothering you...

Thank you...

don't worry...

I'll stand...

³⁸ Sergei Tretiakov, 'Biography of the Object', *October* 118, Fall 2006, p.61.

My business

is

of a delicate nature:

about the place

of the poet

in the workers' ranks

Along with

owners

of stores and property

I'm made subject

to taxes and penalties.

You demand

I pay

five hundred for the half of the year

and twenty-five

for failing to send in my returns.

Now

my work

is like

any other work.

Look here —

how much I've lost,

what

expenses

I have in my production

and how much I spend

on materials.

You know,

of course, about 'rhyme'.

Suppose

a line

ends with the word

'day,'

and then,

repeating the syllables

in the third line

we insert

something like

‘tarara-boom-de-day’.

In your idiom

rhyme

is a bill of exchange

to be honoured in the third line! - - -

that’s the rule.

And so you hunt

for the small change of suffixes and flections

in the depleted cashbox

of conjugations

and declensions.

You start shoving

a word

into the line,

But it's a tight fit - -

you press it and it breaks.

Citizen tax collector,

the poet

spends a fortune on words

In our idiom

rhyme is a keg.

A keg of dynamite.

The line

is a fuse.

The line burns to the end

and explodes

and the town

is blown sky-high?

In a strophe.

Where can you find,

and at what price.

Rhymes

that take aim and kill on the spot?

Suppose

only half a dozen

unheard-of rhymes

were left,

in, say, Venezuela.

And so

I'm drawn

to North and South.

I rush around

entangled in advances and loans.

Citizen!

Consider my travelling expenses.

-- Poetry --

- all of it! - -

is a journey to the unknown.³⁹

³⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'Conversation with a Tax Inspector about Poetry', *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, (Trans. George Reave and Max Hayward), New York: Meridian Books/

World Publishing Co., 1984. Quoted in Rosa Ferré, *Red Calvary: Creation and Power in Soviet Russia Between 1917 and 1945*, Madrid: La Caja Encendida, 2012, pp.151-152.

The juxtaposition of these two voices from the 1920s brings out numerous themes: the problems of money and debt, the malleability of language, the autonomy of literature and progressivist demands for new narratives. The way these concerns have resurfaced after the crisis that began in 2007/8 has specifically privileged literature's relation to financial capital, appropriate to the broad consensus that the source of this crisis and the very novelty of the present is exactly the relationship of domination of finance over other departments of capital.⁴⁰ Moreover, financialisation has stimulated a commonly observed contradiction, the feeling that time has both sped up and come to a standstill at once, and this has had strong implications for the sense that there is no narrative adequate to it. Money is the central representational medium in our society yet it seems to have itself escaped recent attempts to describe it accurately and meaningfully.

Hedging With Pierre Menard

A perverse contemporary counterpoint to Mayakovsky's incisive and playful satire of the negative relationship between markets, writing and money is to be found in the work of philosopher and former hedge fund trader, Elie Ayache, who has discussed extensively the relationship between certain advanced software tools for trading on computerised markets and writing after theories of deconstruction – writing as replication, repetition and difference. Ayache relates the reality-organising quality of markets to recent philosophical considerations of contingency:

⁴⁰ Four key examples: Benjamin Noys, 'Toxic Money and Collapsing Value: The Post-modern Novel and the Aesthetics of Financial Crisis', unpublished paper, 2014, assumes the position that the locus of truth to today's financialised reality might still be the novel; Joshua Clover, 'Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol.41, no.1, Spring 2011, pp.34-52, which forcefully asserts 'poetry or at least non-narrative' as the 'signal form of the period'; Devin Fore, 'The Time of Capital: Brecht's *Threepenny*

Novel', *Non-Site*, no.10, September, 2013, analyses the hybrid crime novel form as adopted by Brecht to reconfigure a narrative solely driven by financial transactions in order to communicate the contradictory temporality of capitalism; and Christopher S. Nealon, *The Matter of Capital*, Cambridge, M.A. and London: Harvard University Press, 2011, which situates post-war American poetry firmly within dynamics of financialisation, arguing that the crises it has wrought have been 'keenly felt' in the medium yet almost completely ignored by its critics.

We think of the contingent thing as the superposition of two thoughts: the thought of the thing as it actually is and the thought of the other thing that it could have been, or that it could be.⁴¹

This is, apparently, a description which could apply to many modes of writing, especially genres dealing with historical time, such as science fiction and historical novels. For Ayache, contingency frames the unpredictable as the inversion of possibility. It is what cannot be predicted because it is unexpected, but it happens out of a situation apparently completely determined and closed to possibility. Therefore what is the medium with which to think contingency without probability? Ayache replies that it is writing mediated by the trader/writer's body.

In his short story, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote', Jorge Luis Borges' eponymous author rewrites Cervantes' original line by line. Yet, as Borges insists, this is no mere copy. Rather, 'His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide – word for word and line for line – with those of Miguel de Cervantes.' Thus, the author can claim a space of contingency in the procedure of writing the Quixote for he writes it only as Pierre Menard would and could at each step write it differently, even if he does not. It is this ambiguous figure of Pierre Menard, which Ayache, relates to the dense and abstract space of high-frequency financial trading. In high-frequency trading, the powerful and complex modelling enabled by computed trades produces a field of possibilities already predicted and predictable. According to Ayache, the trader, much like the writer Pierre Menard, moves through this space and time as on a solid sea and produces difference not out of probability, but out of a highly determined state by allowing himself, the body of the trader/writer, to be 'traversed by contingency'.

⁴¹ Elie Ayache, 'The Medium of Contingency', undated, available, http://xenopraxis.net/readings/ayache_mediumofcontingency.pdf, pp.1-2.

What the stakes of this contingency might be are, as Ayache says, *unpredictable*. They might indicate the complete the end of the market as much as its continuation on completely unexpected terms. A text which approaches such circumstances was generated and distributed in the midst of the antagonistic ground of an unpredictable event, the Occupy protest at Zuccotti Park, New York.



Anon. Flyer distributed at Occupy Wall Street, c.2011

We Are Wall Street

We are Wall Street. It's our job to make money. Whether it's a commodity, stock, bond, or some hypothetical piece of fake paper. It doesn't matter. We would trade baseball cards if it were profitable. I didn't hear America complaining when the market was roaring to 14,000 and everyone's 401k doubled every 3 years. Just like gambling, it's not a problem until you lose. I've never heard of anyone going to Gamblers Anonymous because they won too much in Vegas. Well now the market crapped out, and even though it has come back somewhat, the government and the average Joes are still looking for a scapegoat. God knows there has to be one for everything. Well, here we are.

Go ahead and continue to take us down, but you're only going to hurt yourselves. What's going to happen when we can't find jobs on the Street anymore? Guess what: We're going to take yours. We get up at 5am and work til 10pm or later. We're used to not getting up to pee when we have a position. We don't take an hour or more for a lunch break. We don't demand a union. We don't retire at 50 with a pension. We eat what we kill, and when the only thing left to eat is on your dinner plates, we'll eat that.

[...]

We aren't dinosaurs. We are smarter and more vicious than that, and we are going to survive. The question is, now that Obama and his administration are making Joe Mainstreet our food supply... will he and will they?⁴²

The aggression is telling, and what it tells seems to be something like competition's interior monologue – one which had been, or at least seemed to its teller, normative. At stake in the text is a desperate attempt to reconstruct a subject in a radically changed reality, an attempt to identify fully, or even over-identify, with the movement of capital and its logic of competition as it squashes human life downwards. This is also 'anguish language'; it might be productively compared and contrasted to the extraordinary collective expression of a classroom of 9-10-year-olds who collaged and re-wrote the flyers, manifestos and slogans of a wave of education protests which took place in the UK during 2010-11. Their hybrid and anonymous text carries a 'we', yet this we is highly speculative. It struggles with the present, yet it perceives no destructive necessity, declaring:

Friends I am creating a way of life in which your ingredients will be returned to you. Our lives are controlled by rules, restrictions,

⁴² Text of an anonymously authored printed flyer handed out at Occupy Wall Street protests at Zucotti Park New York, 2011.

limitations, hatred and big concrete things. So, as of this Tuesday
I am removing power from our government and parliament and
other rulers.

Other bodies are also 'traversed by contingency', and in other ways. Lisa Robertson's poem, 'On Form', responds to a biological crisis stemming from cancerous infection. Though the poem makes an analogy between capitalism's unbounded growth and that of a malignant tumour, this does not foreclose transformations of an excessive, erotic and auditory nature.⁴³ Reading the poem aloud forces not only unanticipated associations but also unexpected and seemingly endless movements of the mouth and body as flesh and breath form words and sounds. The implication is that bodies and words may be material for an economy and disease to prey on but they are also the stuff of a wandering excess, perhaps also a resistance to these deathly graspings.

Wealth of Negations

The sense within Mayakovsky's poem of poetry as a form of class struggle and of literature as hostile to the language of economy and its metrics has also returned in the present to challenge the 'rationalisation' of language in line with the austerity programmes of businesses and governments across the world. The struggle against this insipid language and its violence takes the form of an antagonism to the given presentation of the situation. Poetry takes the form of subversion of and challenge to the authorities which claim sovereignty and language are theirs to dispense.

The dictionary definitions produced by the group Wealth of Negations, circulated as a series of small self-published dictionaries, present acid deconstructions of the language through which crisis is managed and which extends the contemporary immiseration industries. How has language been formed and form-determined in the conditions of the present?

⁴³ Lisa Robertson, 'On Form', pp.89-92
in this volume.

MARKET(S), THE**(1.)**

Reality is said to be determined by Its sentiment and the nebulous thing formed by the plural. It is also said to be a reflection of reality. In both forms It is anthropomorphic and at the same time diffuse enough to be decision maker without responsibility. Its diffuse nature has not however prevented It from having a penchant for gurus like the now discredited Alan Greenspan or the still revered Warren Buffet. Nor has this kept it from becoming an all-time TV and radio favourite with constant reports on Its state of being. 'Market watchers' are constantly asked by the folks back in the studio to tell us the score as to the nature of the day's realities as reflected and determined by It. Its cheerleaders have created a never-never land in which it was a 'natural' development, denying the history of its political creation and its continued dependence on political structures and vast state subsidies like the US Defence budget.

(2.)

Jitters. The Market (or Markets) is a blob with a surface of suckers which absorb an ever increasing mass of human activity into itself. Nevertheless it is a sensitive, indeed neurotic beast, all too liable to see, foresee, fantasize or pretend to see things that it does not like. It is then that it develops the jitters: the blob wobbles and is in need of soothing. At which point the cry goes up, Something Must Be Done!

RESILIENCE**(1.)**

Required by most people in the world just to put one foot in front of another every morning, often after yet another knock-back. But among the class exempt from serious discomfort the idea soothes any uncomfortable feelings about the present war on the poor. 'You'll be amazed at their resilience', they will say of people who have no other choice. The word was commandeered from ecological vocabulary, where it refers to how well an ecosystem responds to climatic, parasitic or human-induced shock and damage: how fast, if at all, it recovers.

(2.)

Management theorists Gary Hamel (*Strategy as Revolution*) and Liisa Välikangas (*Lead Like a Lion*) brought the eco-metaphor to the Harvard Business Review in 2003. 'Resilient organisations' are defined by their 'flexible staff', 'adaptable supply chains' and 'agile organisational structures', but above all by their unconditional willingness to conform (or 'adapt') to any conditions imposed. Like failing ecosystems, 'organizations which do not adapt will collapse, to be replaced later with new and more efficient organizations which are better suited to the new environment'. A strategy of aggressive surrender: always *accept everything*, but be sure to beat your competitors by abasing yourself first and deepest.⁴⁴

Managed Language

The banalisation of language, as highlighted by Shklovsky at the beginning of the 20th century, has reached new heights, or rather, lows, at the beginning of the 21st. Under the rule of exchange, in both its endless expansion and its current stalling, new lows are being plumbed. It is an experience through which language is reduced to a medium of the 'service industry' whereby an answer to a question becomes mere product.

Language subsides into a series of tags attached to inert *things*, independent of action, history and each other but neatly susceptible to valuation and exchange.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ All quotations from *Wealth of Negations, Terms and Conditions: Management Edition*, 2013, respectively pp.27-28, pp.34-35 and pp.6-7, available as a PDF booklet at <http://www.wealthofnegations.org/>

⁴⁵ *Wealth of Negations*, 'The Antinomian Verb', originally published under the section heading 'Appendix: Gag-Reflex Grammar' reproduced in this book pp.57-58.

Donato Mancini perceives the shadow of economism prevalent in management literature extending to literary criticism too. He writes that, '[a]t a not too rare extreme, reviews treat the poem-object as if it stores labour energy like a rechargeable battery, inadvertently reproducing something like the labour theory of value.'⁴⁶ Mancini's sensitive evisceration of contemporary criticism hinges on the subtle revelation of labour as the obfuscated standard directing the economy that governs writing as well as general social production even in the midst of poetry's apparent exceptionalism. Yet, despite the sense that aesthetics' bourgeois organisation as a sphere separate from necessitous labour faces imminent collapse into a capitalist realism where capitalists hunt value everywhere (and find it nowhere), this does not necessarily lend credence to Christian Marazzi's assertion of language itself as a form of 'fixed capital'.⁴⁷ Despite the ranking and hierarchical organisation of language by search engines and vast data processing machines and its close relation to exchange, language is not 'capital' nor 'fixed capital'. Language, in capitalism, cannot be counted as a 'cost' of production like wages, machines and raw material. Rather, as a resource, language is something rather more like nature, in the sense it is environmental and counted for 'free' within a capitalist economy rooted in production for value's sake.

In linguistic capitalism, language becomes an instrument: words and their arrangement amount to the complete opposite of an enunciation of potentiality, a bridge of communicability; here a word or two, a speech act, becomes simple exchange. Which is to accuse this regime not only of a reduction of sophisticated speech to mechanism, but of spoiling the very possibility of a misunderstanding by eliminating the space of interpretation in advance – to reduce that elasticity of striving sense perception to a minimum. Yet, amidst this flattening of language, there is always still some limited scope for 'subjective investment'.

⁴⁶ Donato Mancini, 'Secretary of Smash the State', op. cit., p.2.

⁴⁷ Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, op. cit., pp.44-48.

Discrete units of information – or bursts of exhortation – appear to float free in graphic space. Except that the space is not free: the relation between each killer factoid, compact homily or brusque imperative and the next is left unarticulated not because it is undecided, but because it's presumed to be self-evident and meant to be beyond contestation. [...] the transitive function (connecting subject to action to object) tends to be amputated from any verbs that do show up in this format. Create, inspire: an open-ended injunction leaves the recipient to seek the means of compliance within herself.⁴⁸

What is clear is that some relationship between the elasticity of language and the elasticity, or conformity, of subjects is at play here. The less a causal relation is spelled out, the more gaps must be filled, but predictably. Whereas something which doesn't 'make sense' can actually cause an outburst of perceptive strain towards an unforclosed and mobile target, this semblance of openness in fact settles for inducing clichéd thought, or simply triggering routines which were nested in the head by prior related procedures.

The Language of Disidentification

The nexus of subject formation in language is explored in its contemporary aspect by Amy De'Ath with reference to Catherine Wagner's poem, 'My New Job'. De'Ath discusses the poem as a form of testimony to the 'obviousness of dominant reality', but one whereby the absorption of that reality is differently classed,

when verbal slurs and shaming tactics, often projected in the name of so-called self-improvement, actually function as forms of classed and post-feminist symbolic violence that are then absorbed and embodied by those to whom they are addressed [...].⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Wealth of Negations, 'The Antinomian Verb', op. cit.

⁴⁹ Amy De'Ath, "Go in boys. Go in and stay there." *Feminist Poetry and Reading Dialectically*, pp.263-278; Catherine Wagner, 'My New Job', pp.255-262 in this volume.

This picture is further complicated by De'Ath in terms of race, whereby rather than simply making visible the true nature of race relations, the poem and its critic work to recover their very invisibility:

it is the poem's feminism met with a dialectical reading that give the lie to the smiling surfaces and services of post-Fordist immaterial and affective labour of globalised economies, which – as we know, despite the poem's not telling us – are based on an obscuring of race relations even in broad daylight (think of the paradoxical hyper-visibility of 'the ostensible racial threats posed [to the U.S.] by black wageless life, Latino immigrant labour, and "Islamic terrorism").⁵⁰

The production of a compliant subject alluded to above, and the crisis of both language and subject this implies, has proved a fertile ground for the appropriation of mainstream language and discourse by feminist and other marginal (or minor) subject positions. The crisis between language and meaning has proved a fertile ground for the appropriation of mainstream language and discourse by feminist and other marginal (or minor) subject positions. The crisis, postulated by Shklovsky, and banalised by traditions of structuralism and post-structuralism since, can be connected to the non-correspondence between essence and appearance, thought and being, spurred by capital's thoroughgoing secularisation – the loss of relation between man and divinity. Therefore the crisis of value, crisis of male subjectivity and white supremacy ('white' and 'male' as privileged subjects of a society organised around surplus value extraction from waged labour) begin to appear intimately bound. Is the reality that women and racial others bear the brunt of the violence stemming from the crisis of this relation (between capital and labour) significant of the slow unwinding of a relation which founded itself upon their symbolic and material dispossession?

⁵⁰ Chris Chen, 'The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism', *Endnotes 3*, September 2013, p.203. Quoted in Amy De'Ath, *ibid.*

The loss of both a stable subject and the loss of sense in language under the pressure of a society connected primarily by the tissue of economic exchanges has not only provided an opportunity for the flattened utilitarian language of exchange to gain dominance, but has also provided an opportunity for other voices, discourses and critical forms of speech.⁵¹ It has allowed for, according to Alessandra Bochetti, the silence of men:

Only today, through the affirmation of a multiple, contradictory subject, do women find themselves within a theoretical space, with the possibility of producing a discourse.

A crisis was necessary for this space to open up; the silence of men and their full words. Only through this process of loss of sense and acquisition of new senses does woman find herself the subject, and not just the object of knowledge.⁵²

A less affirmative inflection of a related problematic is formulated by the Italian feminist collective Movimento Femminista Romano in a text called 'Sexuality and Money'. Initially the text proposes several relations between currency, markets and gendered identity:

The buying and selling of my unreality; the connotations of representation, where I am always invited to pretend myself in love or

⁵¹ Of acts, opportunities and poetry:

For surely words are actions.

- Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, (Trans. Giovanni Pontiero), New York: New Directions, 1992, p.15.

Poetry must cease to be a myth.

It is neither before nor after action;
it is action.

- Youcef Sebti, quoted in Howard Slater, 'Lotta Poetica', op. cit.

One must write *poetry* in such a way that if one threw the *poem* in a *window*, the pane would break.

- Danil Kharms, (1934) quoted in *Red Calvary*, op. cit.

WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY
Smash and grab.

- Wealth of Negations, *Terms and Conditions: Management Edition*, 2013, p.48.

⁵² Alessandra Bochetti, 'The Indecent Difference', (1982), *Italian Feminist Thought*, Eds. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, London: Blackwell, 1991, p.151.

convinced of the need to marry power or dissent, culture or counter-culture, while being forced as a schizophrenic subject into the hierarchy of identification. I condemn capital while they force me to capitalize on myself, but today I know that the economy is never neutral, that time and the economic relationship are other from me, but are imposed on me as reference points to organize my defence.⁵³

From here, the text moves to make space for a politics which problematises the gendered identities on offer, but also the possible challenges to a counter-culture which could yet become a part of that market, and finds itself still resistant to proposing a subject which would be identical with itself or another.⁵⁴

I am so unromantic that the ‘becoming woman’ talked about by the male who runs after the money of ‘his’ female part does not seduce me on the black market of alternatives. I am seduced by the gestures we do not make, the language we do not use, the fact that you and I both know so well the measures that we submit to and that we frequently offer in return, although not loving it, and that every time you present yourself with a ‘category’, my declaration of love and my political proposal is in succeeding in conjugating the verb of refusal to recognize ourselves and make us alike in that way.⁵⁵

In response to a conference in California of ‘revolutionary poets’, which took place simultaneously to the first Anguish Language seminar in October 2011, an anonymous ‘writer of poems’ presented some of the problems she encountered at the meeting:

⁵³ Movimento Femminista Romano, ‘Sexuality and Money’, (1979). Original translation published in English in *Italian Feminist Thought*, Eds. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, London: Blackwell, 1991.

⁵⁴ See also Clarice Lispector, ‘Who has not asked himself the question at one time or other: am I a Monster or is this what it means

to be a person?’ and ‘The question ‘Who am I?’ creates a need. And how does one satisfy that need? To probe oneself is to recognise that one is incomplete’. Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, (Trans. Giovanni Pontiero), New York: New Directions, 1992, pp.15-16.

⁵⁵ Movimento Femminista Romano, ‘Sexuality and Money’, op. cit., p.73.

I am not opposed to poems. I love poems. I love people who write poems, passionately. But the SOCIAL ROLE OF POET is a disaster, just like every other social role. The struggle is for the end of roles, for the end of the division of labour, for the end of the gender distinction, for the end of identity as it exists. Free relations, not roles. Poems made by anyone who makes them. No poets. And no 'As poets'.⁵⁶

Impersonal Poetry

Clearly a crisis is an opportunity, not just for professionals. It is an opening through which less-heard voices rise to the surface. It marks also – in our present moment – a troubling of the requirements of a working and functional individualised self, and perhaps therefore a potential return to the 'impersonal poetry' spoken of by the Comte de Lautréamont.⁵⁷

Forms of everyday speech and everyday anxiety are explored in texts by John Cunningham, Suzanne Goldenberg and Mira Mattar in this book. The scraps of 'overheard language' which Mattar records are arranged into an impersonal and painful poetics of daily matters filling barely habitable space. John Cunningham indicates a form of creaturely becoming under the pressures and alienation of crisis-stricken contemporary working life as desperate escape.

⁵⁶ Anon., 'Joshua Clover Had One Point at the final Manifestos and Or Practical Proposals Panel', 2013, andor-practical-proposals-panel/

⁵⁷ Such dissolution involves, 'the disorder of the senses' and of the self as proposed by Arthur Rimbaud and Lautréamont, both writing in proximity to the brief upheaval of the Paris Commune in 1870 and 1871. See also, with respect to the disordering of the senses and 'impersonal poetry': 'The poet should make himself a seer by a long, immense, deliberate disorder of all the senses'. Arthur Rimbaud, 'Letter to Paul Demeny', 1871.

'Personal poetry has had its moment of juggling with the relative and contorting with the contingent. Let us take up again the indestructible thread of impersonal poetry', Comte de Lautréamont, 1870. Theodor W. Adorno claims that Arthur Rimbaud exemplifies the divergence of forms of modern poetry from mere communication: 'Art now reaches people, moreover, solely by way of the sort of shock that strikes a blow against what pseudo-scientific ideology calls communication; art for its part achieves integrity only when it refuses to play along with communication'. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, op. cit., p.321.

Goldenberg's poems suggest that animal life is a fate that befalls those thrown out of the more dynamic forms of accumulation driving mainstream social relations, with less prospect of escape than the increasing unlikelihood of getting by.

The Self-Abolition of the Poet

Before concluding I will briefly raise a few examples of what we might understand as intensifiers of the questions around crisis and literature from the midst of recent struggles, where each necessarily challenges these terms in concrete ways. The first is the iterative song (many versions exist online) known as 'Oh Council of Bastards' sung primarily, but not exclusively, by congregations of fans of the Cairo football club Al Ahlawy.⁵⁸ Without diminishing the concrete and complex relationship of the football fans of Al-Ahlawy to Egyptian politics and the so-called Arab Spring, which is too rich to attend to in detail here, the video appears to embody the emerging shape of novel social forms. The song galvanises an iterative and collective set of poetic gestures, not confined to speech alone but involving rhythm, bodies, hands, space, repetition, personal and collective history. There are many versions of the song, including one on the commemorative protest of the state-sponsored massacre at a football game in Port Said. It is a lament, but one with organising functions.

As an addendum, to a series of short essays exploring the 'Self-Abolition of the Poet' for contemporary poetry magazine *Jacket2*, poets Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr chose to focus upon another choreographed form: the elegiac poetics of dance of Turf Feinz, a group of dancers who practice 'turfing', a specific dance style from Oakland which involves slow and sometimes balletic moves carried out in the street.

⁵⁸ Egypt, Al Ahlawy supporters chant, 'Oh Council of Bastards' available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XvnIOzX64I>

The essay poses the question ‘What would it mean to say that a dance is poetic?’ and situates this in relation to contemporary production techniques and the dancers’ remoteness from such sites of production:

If the social distance between poetry and painting concerns ideologies of production, what then of dance – of allegories of physical labor without a product? It would be easy enough to go to the late modern ideas about performance and post-medium arts, the dialectically doomed attempts to outmaneuver commodification. But this seems inapposite to say the least, and moreover shifts us unremarked to the consumption side, where commodities are exchanged and exhausted. This won’t do, finally. The dance is production side, if via its absence. It is scored and choreographed to the rhythm of machines but without their presence, embodying the blank technicity of labor without any production to speak of – but still unable to efface entirely its moments of human invention, the swerve. It is a dance of aimlessness and streetcorner, invention for its own sake, amazing and defeated: a dance, and here we perhaps arrive at the far horizon of the argument, not of surplus goods but surplus populations, excluded from the economy if not from the violence of the state. A post-production poetics.⁵⁹

Between these two examples of dances, each enacted by a particular part of a population organised as *surplus* to the general economy yet intimate with its violent regulation, we shift from an impersonal *poetry* to an impersonal *poetics*. Rather than singular discrete product, these examples make a performed shape in a particular place and time open to other iterations.

⁵⁹ Jasper Bernes, Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr, ‘Poetry, or the Elegy of Surplus’, <https://jacket2.org/commentary/elegy-or-poetics-surplus>. Turf Feinz’s dance piece can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQRRnAhmB58>

With contrast to a published unit of written language we do not know whether its end is ritual (mourning) or representation (narrative). It is precisely because there is no proper place for those who perform these moves, that their stylised actions and enunciations force open something unknown through which they can move.

There are many other approaches and questions to be raised about the turn to radical politics in recent writing, particularly experimental poetry, Anguish Language merely hopes to cut across and disturb them in a partisan way, and in doing so potentially connect with related initiatives.

Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall

Late in the process of editing this book in 2015, the North American poetry scene began to experience a year of crisis. The key catalyst for the shake up was a literary event at Brown University where Kenneth Goldsmith, conceptual poet and host of the popular online archive of experimental art, film and sound, ubu.com, read a poem based on the autopsy report of Michael Brown. Brown, an unarmed young black man, was murdered by police in Ferguson Missouri in August 2014, provoking weeks of rioting in the town and sustained protest all over the US. This movement has become an ongoing and effective movement protesting police brutality.

The ironic appropriation of material as neutral is a common trope in the US conceptual poetry scene, but in this case the proximity of the material to the events in Ferguson and a strongly felt current of anger at the more or less regular deaths at the hands of US police became incendiary. Alongside a backlash against 'experimentalism', what is interesting in terms of the framework of 'crisis literature' is the way struggles on the street have reverberated through a whole cultural system of patronage and production. If not making a decisive reorganisation of the status quo yet, at the very least making existing hierarchies visible and vulnerable. As Mexican commentator Heriberto Yépez puts it:

This great crisis is serious because of its critique of racism and the fact that it doesn't involve just one group but the entire structure in intense (electronic) battles that are unprecedented. And this happens within the context of the strong social movements now taking place in the United States; it's the crisis of the streets entering North American literature.⁶⁰

Since Goldsmith, other prominent white poets such as Vanessa Place and Ron Silliman have been castigated, as the initial rage has turned into a widespread, articulate and forceful denunciation of a gilded vanguard which has questioned so many rules but failed to address their own institutionalisation and complicity with white supremacy. These contradictory aspects of the scene were already the source of anger and criticism from writers who have experienced marginalisation for their colour and class. Cathy Park Hong's article for *Lana Turner*, published several months before the Goldsmith reading, shows how deep the tensions between a white apolitical avant-garde and an institutionally marginalised, racialised and radicalised non-white scene had already become.

The avant-garde's 'delusion of whiteness' is the specious belief that renouncing subject and voice is anti-authoritarian, when in fact such wholesale pronouncements are clueless that the disenfranchised need such bourgeois niceties like *voice* to alter conditions forged in history. The avant-garde's 'delusion of whiteness' is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be 'post-identity' and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for who they are.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Heriberto Yépez, 'La crisis de la poesía gringa se expande / The Crisis of North American Poetry Expands', available online at <http://venepoetics.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/la-crisis-de-la-poesia-gringa-se.html>

⁶¹ Cathy Park Hong, 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde' *Lana Turner Journal*, No.7, available online at <http://www.lana-turnerjournal.com/print-issue-7-contents/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde>

Hong's perspective presents substantial challenges to tendencies I have identified above towards the questioning of subjecthood and promotion of impersonality, suggesting that such directions need to be rooted in thorough consideration of the concrete dynamics of who qualifies as a subject in the first place. The movement which has followed in its wake has powerfully revindicated the impossibility of 'neutral language' and, as well as depositing some of its most inane defenders, looks set to bring a productive current of antagonism to bear on poetry's many unexamined platitudes.⁶²

Stressing the quality of 'impersonality' as a foundation of language and hallmark of engaged contemporary poetry, and claiming a truly 'Marxian' concept of class, critic Daniel Tiffany has recently presented arguments revivifying class antagonism while attacking many contemporary political poets on the well-worn ground (and glasshouse in this case) of academic privilege.⁶³ The problem is that class antagonism in language seems, in Tiffany's account, to be reducible to only diction. One wonders then if class as we knew it (as identity) has dissolved then why would diction prove so stable a source of class belonging and performance? There may not any longer be a framework in which to affirm something like workers' identity, but it does not either take much attention to see that 'owning a smartphone' is not 'the only prerequisite these days to becoming a capitalist'.⁶⁴

There is no hope for Daniel Tiffany's 'vanguard poetry'⁶⁵ nor Kenneth Goldsmith's 'language management'.⁶⁶ Rather, I hope to insist on doing the work of making the questions raised by this book collective problems.

⁶² Not necessarily widely representative of this broader movement, but worth considering as one tip of this iceberg, The Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, <http://gringpo.com/>

⁶⁴ Quotations from Daniel Tiffany, 'Cheap Signaling', op. cit.

⁶⁵ Daniel Tiffany, 'Cheap Signaling', op. cit.

⁶³ Daniel Tiffany, 'Cheap Signaling: Class Conflict and Diction in Avant-Garde Poetry', *Boston Review*, July 15, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/daniel-tiffany-cheap-signaling-class-conflict-and-diction-avant-garde-poetry>

⁶⁶ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10593419-uncreative-writing>

Just as capitalist theories of value assume that the value received by capitalists is equal to their 'contribution', and so effectively attribute to individuals the 'creation' of value which is in fact the work of innumerable people, the aesthetic thinking of bourgeois writers, including those who consider themselves to be opposed to present social relations, perpetually distorts into an aporetic of individual obligation a task whose true domain is collective human existence.⁶⁷

As Danny Hayward's contribution makes plain, 'those working in culture are too often compelled to think their situation individually and think their production in the separation in which it has been fetishised – considering content and not dissemination as the proper place for 'complicated conceptual thinking'.

There is still the important work to discern actual relations from their appearance – to do the necessary work to distinguish externalising crisis from internalising austerity. Could it be that the class generating an 'autopoiesis of rebellious political culture' reflects upon its own dissolution and decomposition in crisis conditions?⁶⁸ That the historical fluctuations of struggle, domination and language require close and detailed attention rather than slick analogy? These questions are those of our time; they are raised but not decided by contemporary poetic matter. Language and poetics elicit new sensitivities and form how these questions might be approached and struggled with yet can but only vaguely anticipate what shape such movements take and what their successes might look and feel like.

⁶⁷ Danny Hayward, 'By Impossibly Popular Demand', pp.279-284 in this volume.

⁶⁸ This phrase is quoted from Gáspár Miklós Tamás, 'Telling the Truth About Class'. Socialist Register, vol.42; available online at http://www.gerlo.hu/kommunizmus-vita/tgm/telling_the_truth_about_class.pdf

Note

An earlier version of this text served as the introduction to the initial Anguish Language workshop/symposium held October 2012 at ZK/U, Berlin and was presented at the UDK Berlin Graduale 2013.

Wealth of Negations

The Antinomian Verb

And Its Occlusion

which is NOT a question of the linguistic etiquette that preoccupies self-appointed defenders of ‘correct’, ‘standard’ or ‘received’ usage. Anyone making claims about ‘correct’ *pronunciation* spouts pure class-cultural bigotry. Codified *spelling* – a fairly recent imposition on the highly syncretic English language – is mere decoration provided the words can be recognised. *Word order* and *punctuation* matter because they decide what a sentence says: any ‘rule’ unrelated to this function is a dead letter. But at stake in the status of the *infinitive verb* is the very possibility of articulating and acting on *relations* in a temporal, changeable world.¹

Occlusion may take the simple form of recruiting a scab noun to do the work of a verb: *I access the internet, we leverage our strengths...*

Or consultant Frankensteins may re-animate the body of a noun as the simulacrum of a verb whose monstrous nature is betrayed by its lack of an infinitive, as in: *transitioning, conferencing, messaging...*

More general flight from the verb dependent, overly specific *sentence* is evident in what for the sake of concision can be called the PowerPoint style, although its use is by no means limited to company slideshows. Discrete units of information – or bursts of exhortation – appear to float free in graphic space. Except that the space is not free: the relation between each killer factoid, compact homily or brusque imperative and the next is left unarticulated not because it is undecided, but because it’s presumed to be self-evident and meant to be beyond contestation.

¹ See E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*, London: The New Press, 1995, p.21.

The requirement to guess it right is one more way of exacting subjective 'investment' in the job, the project, the advertised product or whatever. For similar reasons the *transitive* function (connecting subject to action to object) tends to be amputated from any verbs that do show up in this format. *Create, inspire*: an open-ended injunction leaves the recipient to seek the means of compliance *within herself*.

These and kindred methods downgrade the verb to something like a by-product of the noun, an accessory it can almost do without (or at best a windy intransitive, an internal flexing of the psychic profile). Language subsides into a series of tags attached to inert *things*, independent of action, history and each other but neatly susceptible to valuation and exchange. A tendency as old as accounting, but one renewed in recent decades by risk management and the drive to account for contingency itself in verbless data series, configured for exchange whether by traders in packets of 'exposure' or between behaviour modification teams.

Subordination of the verb is directed against the infinitive in particular. The impersonal infinitive gives actions and relations the same independent 'reality' in language that things and attributes receive from nouns. Without the infinitive the verb can exist only by grace of a noun, implying an impossible world where actions and accidents would be somehow less material than their agents and patients, subjects and objects more real than the relations between them. The 'language' fully fitted to such a world would be no more than a list of proper names, or property values.

Note

This short text forms an appendix, 'Gag- Reflex Grammar', to the Wealth of Negations dictionaries available from <http://www.wealthofnegations.org/>

Mira Mattar

At Once a City

Cranes elegant as dogs, or drawings of dogs, angled in yellow embraces in the distance. A building goes up with three happy wind turbines. Another goes down with its inhabitants – at once a city and its exiles. *Imagine there's a string pulling your head gently up, imagine there's a golden light hovering over your heart.* Here men cough coughs full of mucous, full as faith and as easy to spit out. They pause, with rhythm, to breathe. Small cracks score clutched Formica tables marking each breath. *Imagine the light spreading slowly over your lungs, over your whole chest.* Polyester ripples under once sky blue plastic fans spinning old oil for breeze. *Now picture that light spreading over your whole body.* Magic makes the money stretch; its just the knowing of a mystery and using it with impunity. *Can you feel yourself glowing?*

Two women. I'm one. Is our sadness commensurate? Is it osmotic? Between us is it halved or doubled? Does it leave a residue? Is it measurable? Who will its measuring serve? What index of happiness to eat three times a day? Could we stomach it? A soft win.

A radio tuned out by a nudge announces *investment's a good idea when you understand and want to take the risk.* An Elvis hangs mid-thrust behind a bell, back from when men were men. *If you get anything from the '50s or '60s the value could be colossal.* Six bald heads gleaming spit-shine gleams hover over edges. *Better to put your money in vintage memorabilia than stocks and shares.* Lips almost touch in the gap between two straws, a dream wide as the continent it was made in.

The points on the collar of a brown cowboy shirt are silver capped, a sheriff's badge is pinned just above the paunch upon which rest two white hands soft from lack of use. *Alright captain.* He glides white coated, uniformed as a doctor, a priest, a caretaker. *Happy birthday son happy birthday.* He stands listening to grievances, diagnosing, taking orders.

Fifty again this year are you? The cowboy stutters at a black haired girl who sits patiently. *Forty nine, forty nine maybe next year.*
 Is his impassiveness exhaustion or wisdom? *Haven't lived yet have you?*
 We confess our needs from our booths.

If ever I had to describe him on the radio so he could be found after the wreckage of a typhoon and I said he is the one like no other how would that help? *There she goes, there she goes again.* Organs and cells are ambulatory. Here on the table, there in the pan. *And I just can't contain, this feeling that remains.* My heart in another's body, that cannibal love like that cannibal work. *Pulsing through my veins.*

Bolted in groups no larger than three – more is a party, a riot – some metal chairs adorn a newly created public square (the previous square was rotten with people). Fixed in spontaneous arrangements as though two or three friends have chanced upon each other, pulled their chairs warmly together and talked into the evening. Or better, strangers, by a miracle of synchronicity formed in the allegiance between the new square and the new chairs, have met, talked, kissed, called it love and bought a house nearby to prove it – the community effect.

Life satisfaction. Feel what do in life is worthwhile. Satisfaction with family life. Satisfaction with social life. Support for serious personal or family matter. Healthy life years (male). Healthy life years (female). Long-standing illness or health problem. Satisfaction with present job. No time to do things enjoy in life. Did voluntary work. Cultural participation. Sport or exercise participation. Feeling safe walking alone at night. Feel close to people in local area. Satisfaction with accommodation. Risk of poverty or social exclusion. Making ends meet with difficulty. Trust in national government. Recycling municipal waste.

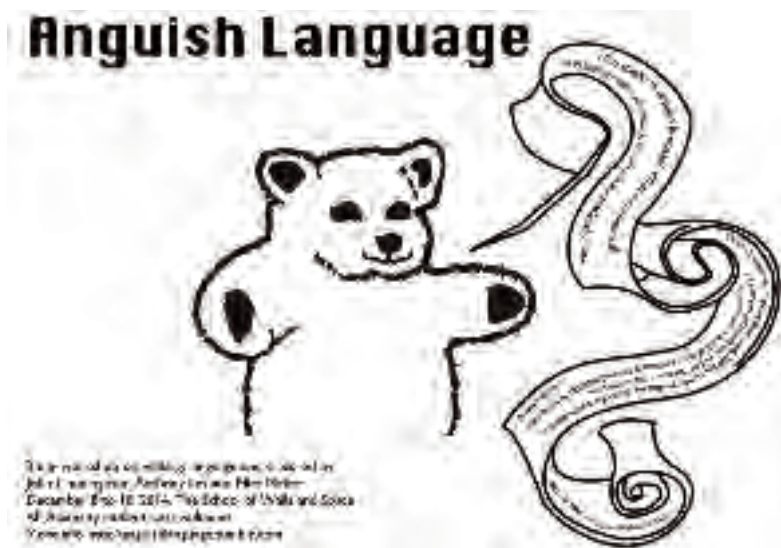
A girlish woollen coat, a rose pink acrylic scarf, brown ankle boots, a bag from Risky, a whip of cold air. Removing a yellow mitten to pay she is the middle of a conversation, *no one, she's wrong, a friend of mine, a casual friend, not like you.* A slick of blonde hair falls into her eyes, her blue earrings catch the light, *stupid, they told me, Jake and Colin,*

they told me I'll be kicked out of the kingdom. She sips, don't mistreat widows or orphans. She sips, if you do and they cry out to me I'll show my anger and come raging among you with the sword and your wives will end up widows and your children orphans. Winding the rose pink acrylic scarf, she leaves.

Dipping now the sun lends the scene a cumbersome saturation, acutely revealing the too much and the not enough. *The people on the ground floor sit there letting their rubbish blow around. Shadows lengthen along the black and white linoleum, five strings of hair stripe across a forehead. I don my rubber gloves and pick it up and in full view hoping to shame them. The pavement is studded with constellations of phlegm globules. The petals of a white tulip, bowing under the weight of its own head, reflect in turn the abiding strip light light and the loyal pulses of bright exterior neons.*

With every stammering dismissed as superfluous, information is being lost. A necessary signal needs a ready ear.

Anguish Language Copenhagen Group You Have the Lock But I Have the Key (Skeleton)



YOU HAVE THE LOCK BUT I HAVE THE ~~LOCK~~ KEY.
[MOMENT OF DECISION]

1/ How to decide what is a key and what is a lock in this moment of punishment encyclopedia, how to untie this book of crisis?

2/ Where do I find the skeleton keys to unlock these civil war frig new sensitivities or are they just the mathematics of our own

3/ Space left above a desert of reading beyond civil war
4/ What piece overlooking a green field, or something else

5/ What right vs righteousness?

6/ What rhythm does the question have, with what cadence
What true acknowledgment can be between us when
tear up with management bowing at the
When did politics become a dialogue on
toughness of decisionmaking stopped in
at lunch break!

① I am only a window, my clothes held together by pins, my teeth yellow
mouth open to see.

② my situation is hazardous because so many different now, (values &
concepts) - my past failed - I couldn't call ~~anyone~~ anyone
I call it ~~existence~~ existence
I call it a state of
to travel the way you know how, without knowing where that kind of travel
Knowing where you want to go, without knowing in which way to travel

~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

just as we can hear the wolves howling, but we do not see the lamb's throat
the decisions that affect our lives has been ~~more~~ withdrawn, sanitized &
What need is it to have the key when the lock has been transported &
opening ~~out~~ ~~the~~ tall grassy meadows raining with ~~the~~ ones and
the right answers — and if they don't the position of your number

CRISIS? WHAT SEEMS TO OPEN AN APERTURE (BUT TO WHAT?) BEHIND A
 FRIENDSHIPS? DO THESE FRIENDSHIPS FORMED IN THE CIVIL WAR OR CRISIS CONTAIN
 ASPECTIVE DECOMPOSITION?

mondeities in clothes held together by poor
 abandoned, which fondly caught me in the pass of cards forgotten

is it broken?

capitalism mashing it off
 a backdoor?

the run? Was it when
 mashing with mysticism

of, ~~decently~~ ~~indefiniteness~~? A community of ~~repeated~~ ~~things~~ ~~where~~

in ~~the~~ ~~will~~, is ~~intended~~ ~~to~~ ~~create~~ ~~workings~~ in the face of our
 only to the ~~artist~~?

improving.
 will take you.
 to get there.

being cut, here we ~~are~~ ^{irreconcilably} in the moment of decision ~~with~~ ^{unavoidably} the ability to make
 deposited into a black tomb, band ~~with~~ ^{and} banded with prejudice.
~~to~~ ^{to} another temporality? — to interfaces hidden behind red curtains
 zeros bobbing to the ~~music~~ ^{music} rhythm of questions designed to provoke
 will be indicated by the end of a long hazel stick.

How to decide what is a key and what is a lock in this moment of crisis?
What seems to open an aperture (but to what?) becomes a punishment
encyclopaedia. How to unbind this book of crisis?

Where do I find the skeleton keys to unlock these civil war friendships?
Do these friendships formed in the civil war of crisis contain
new sensitivities or are they just the mathematics of our own
affective decomposition?

Spume left where a dread of reading hound civil war friendships in
clothes held together by pins.

What peace overlooking a green field, or something acclaimed, which
fondly caught me in the pass of names forgotten?

What right was righteousness?

What rhythm does the question have, with what cadence is it drenched?

What acknowledgement can be between us when capitalism masking
itself teams up with management howling at the backdoor?

When did politics become a dialogue on the run? Was it when
togetherness of decision making stopped intermingling at lunch break?

I am only a woman, my clothes held together by pins, my teeth yellow,
practicing mindfulness, as a community of cupcakes blooms where
houses used to be.

My education, the managed product of many different men, (wolves
running in the halls), is sentenced to pleated uselessness in the face of
our century's crises – my aunt called it mysticism,

I call belonging to the masses

I call it rebellion

I call it a new sensitivity.

To travel the way you know how, without knowing where that kind of travel will take you. Knowing where you want to go, without knowing in which way you travel to get there.

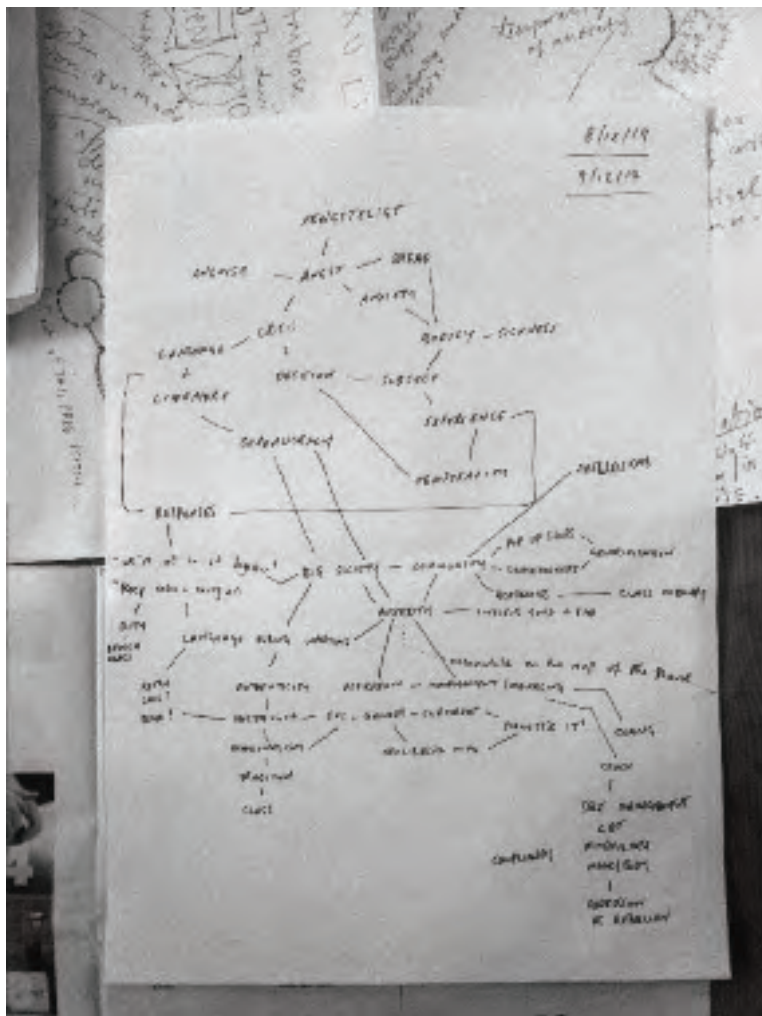
Just as we can hear the wolves howling, but we do not see the lamb's throat being cut, here we flail unreconcilably in the moment of decision when the ability to make the decisions that affect our lives has been withdrawn, monetised and deposited into a black tomb, bound and bonded with prejudice. What good is it to have the key when the lock has been transported to another temporality? – to interfaces hidden behind red cotton curtains opening onto tall grassy meadows raining with ones and zeros bobbing to the rhythm of questions designed to provoke the right answers – and if they don't, the position of your number will be indicated by the end of a long hazel stick.

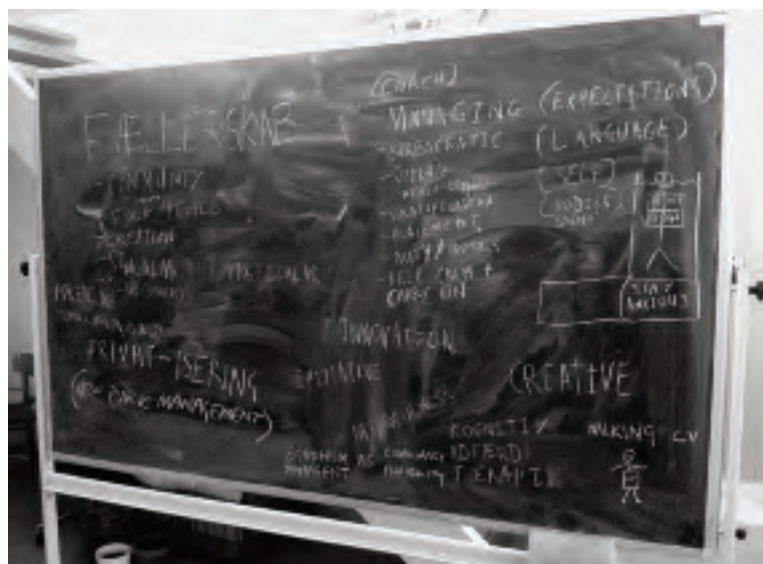
Herstory hierarchy fondly caught me rummage
overlooking a green field or something
big and little new sensitivities rolling under a white shirt
driven to the point of licking the blackboard
drenched best friends writing needs
swept by paper sadness
a common punishment encyclopaedia
where did the dialogue go
grey gross
howling blackness
a bewildered compass sentenced under your nose.

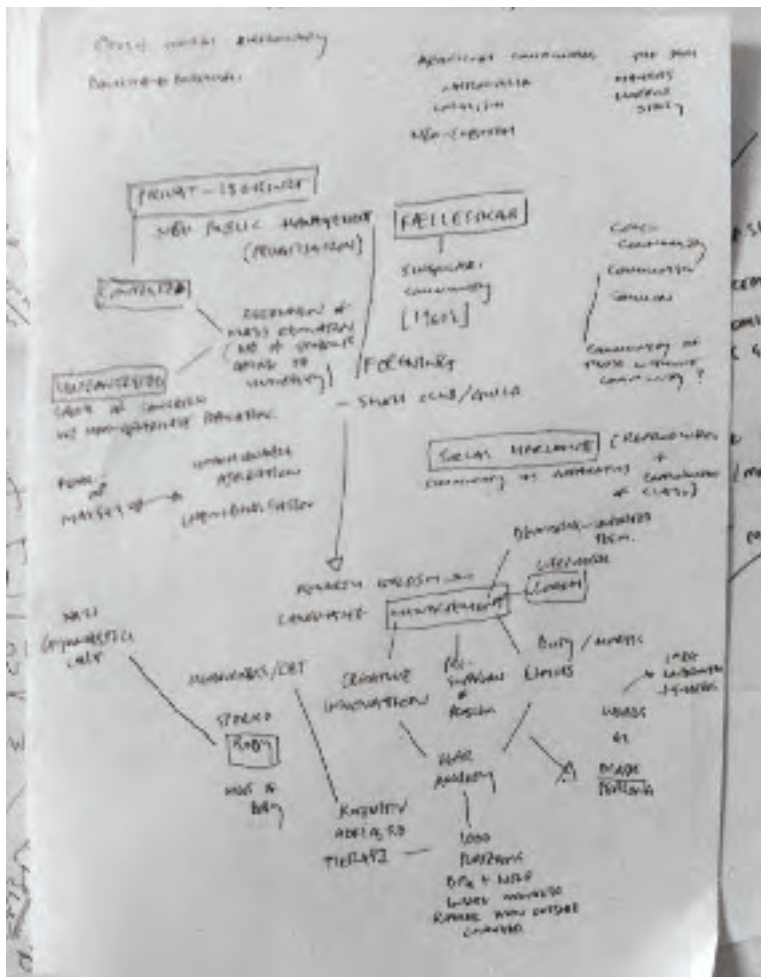
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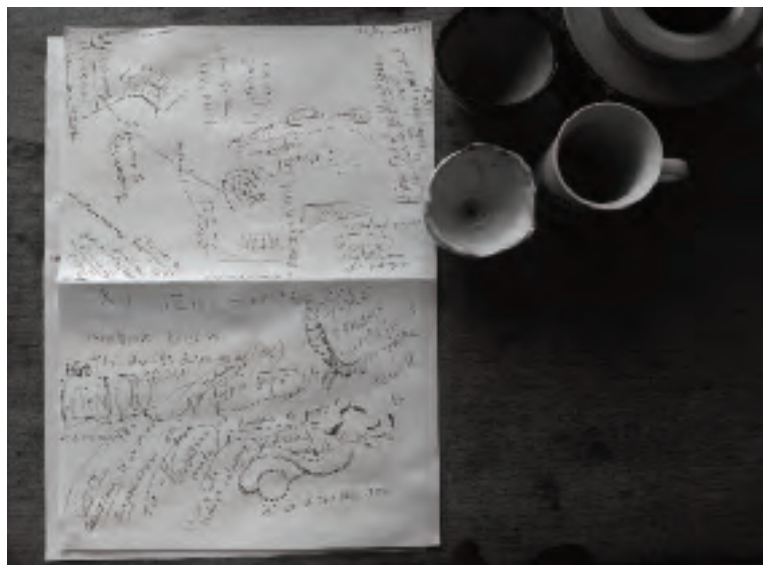
The handwritten text overleaf was generated using a combination of writing games during the Anguish Language workshop at The School of Walls and Space, The Royal Academy of the Visual Arts, Copenhagen, Denmark, 8-10 December 2014.

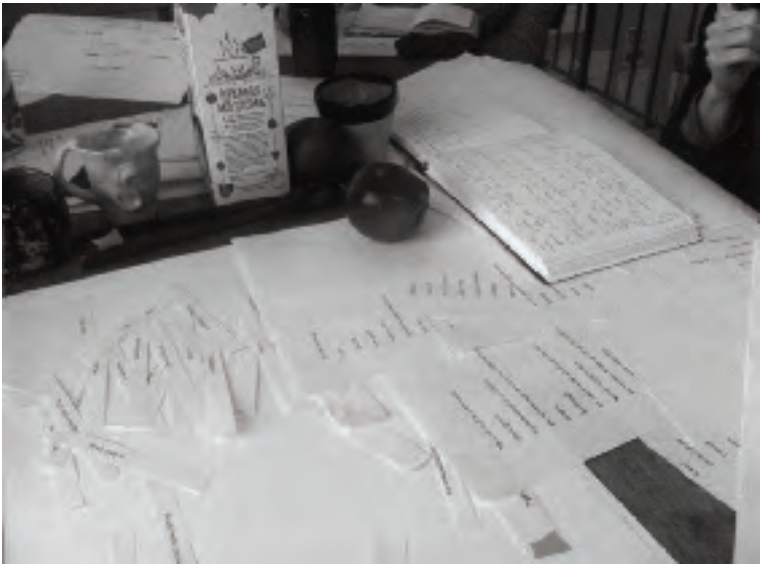












All images from the Anguish Language workshop at The School of Walls and Space, The Royal Academy of the Visual Arts, Copenhagen, Denmark, 8-10 December 2014.

Danny Hayward

Transitional Poetry

I want to begin with Trotsky's definition of a bridge.

It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.

Trotsky proposes an infrastructural metaphor for political progress. The 'masses' are stranded on one side of a river. On this side is their daily economic struggle: piece work, wage cuts, the undesired shortening or lengthening of the working day, overtime, job insecurity, pensions, safety on the job, medical insurance, speed of the assembly line, union representation and solidity, supervision and surveillance, the constantly renewed struggle just to get up in the morning, reliability of pay, the calibration of future expectations, how will my kids be, I worked for this, the need to be realistic, contradiction. On the other side of the bridge is communism. There is, Trotsky implies, there must be, a bridge. All we need to do is help the workers find this towering piece of fixed capital infrastructure.

The commercial folk duo Simon & Garfunkel, whose own transitional programme has sold over 25 million copies since its release in 1971, might have agreed with this piece of social analysis. There are to my knowledge still no available sales figures for *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Fourth International*, and the conditions for such an analysis assuredly have begun to 'get somewhat rotten', as Trotsky himself (in collaboration with American leaders of the soon to be formed Socialist Workers Party) said of the 'conditions' for the proletarian revolution in 1947. Trotskyist groups too have decomposed in the last three decades, without yet quite acquiring the distinctive purple-bluish colouration of the old communist parties; but this is enough politico-forensic entomology for one paper.

The metaphor from the *Death Agony* is an urbanist *paysage sentimental*, a scene of extraction in which sentiment is harvested from the natural 'scene', shipped down the Thames, the Havel or the Rio de la Plata, and traded into the commercial and political centres of mid-20th century industrial capitalism. When seated at his typewriter Trotsky was probably not given to think of the town of Morpeth or the village of Mitford, and for that reason he was less likely to have been contemplating the river that this paper will discuss in most detail, the River Wensbeck in Northumberland, which served as the more conventional *paysage sentimental* for another writer of a revolutionary era, the Reverend William Bowles. Bowles:

As slowly wanders thy sequester'd stream,
wensbeck! The mossy-scatter'd rocks among,
In fancy's ear still making plaintive song
To the dark woods above, that waving seem
To bend o'er some enchanted spot, remov'd
From life's vain scenes; I listen to the wind,
And think I hear meek sorrow's plaint.¹

¹ William Bowles, *Sonnets, Written Chiefly on Picturesque Spots, During a Tour*, Bath and London: R. Cruttwell, 1789, p.15.

Once adjusted for inflation, Bowles' *Sonnets* of 1789 were about as successful with the goutily emancipated would-be nature-spirits of the English bourgeoisie as Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water* was with the long-haired Affirmniks of the counterculture, who in 1971 were beginning to pack away their anti-Vietnam placards and leap into the stagnant and therefore perhaps not quite troubled waters of the 'jobs market', as the 'unofficial' end of Bretton Woods led to dollar devaluation, declining purchasing power, and a premonitory uptick in unemployment. While they filled in and mailed off their job applications, those student activists might have taken comfort from the cooing spiritual remittances of Art Garfunkel's 'When you're down and out/When you're on the street', although Garfunkel's ungrammatical claim that he will 'lay me down/like a bridge over troubled waters' – no doubt influenced in its form and content by Martin Heidegger's insistence that '[b]ridges and hangars, stadiums and power stations are buildings but not dwellings' – would likely have sounded a false note to any American for whom being 'down and out [...] on the street' involved sleeping under bridges and not submitting to peaceful coitus in the arms of a man who happened to labour under the false impression that he was like one.

But whether Trotsky's pathico-political infrastructure crosses the River Wensbeck, the River Niagara, or the River Island is perhaps not especially important. The metaphor at work is of good provenance. On this side of the river, 'life's vain scenes', vain from the Latin *Vanus*, meaning 'empty, idle, or unprofitable', the economic scene of the daily struggle, of 'present demands'. Bowles has a controversialist's sense for these connotations. Daily life is literally full, active and profitable; it is, he thinks, metaphorically empty, idle and unrewarding; but one of his limits as a poet is that he could never recognise that for many on this side, life might be literally full and active but both metaphorically and literally unprofitable, that is, more vain than an ironic poetic genre convention is ever apt to express. Moving on, at the other side of the river, in 'some enchanted spot', we find the accomplished seizure of the organs of coercion by the working classes, the real movement towards communism and the self-abolition of

the proletariat, where, just as I (the Reverend William Bowles) 'listen to the wind,/And think I hear meek sorrow's plaint', the enormous collective advance of humanity is perceptible in even the most mundane performance of social labour.

Bowles' politely small and temperate volume of sonnets, published to no immediate public acclaim at about the time that Paris was tearing the detested Bastille to the ground – Bowles' sonnets were startling to their best readers because they shattered a set of options that seemed for 18th century verse writers to be indefeasible. The poems were neither bathetic nor exact. In the everyday occurrences of nature 'remov'd' from life's vain scenes an animal truth is made possible. 'I listen to the wind/And think I hear meek sorrow's plaint', writes Bowles. These are momentous changes in the open book of the senses. Using Trotsky's terms, Bowles' 'basic demand' of the wind is that it is the wind. Life is life, money is money; the wind is the wind. It is not true that you get what you pay for. Filipino workers in textile factories are often paid nothing; Greek public sector workers the same; slaves in East London have a similar complaint; and if Bowles had listened hard to the wind and heard nothing he would certainly have been justified in making recourse to Pan's employment tribunal on the slopes of Parnassus. Likewise had Bowles attended the Erfurt Congress of 1891, he would have known that his maximum demand of the wind ought to be that it personify itself immediately as Sorrow, venting her plaint and spleen like Miss Muffet in the mood for regurgitation.

Bowles could well have chosen to make exactly that demand; he could very easily have written of the wind that when he listens to it he does or must hear 'meek sorrow's plaint'. But he does not make this kind of demand. Instead he makes neither a minimum nor a maximum demand of nature but instead a third kind of demand, a middling, a transitional kind of demand. This equivocation was not by any means an inexpugnable defence against literary ridicule. Johnson's *Lives of the Poets* are full of instances where bad similes and lumbering personifications are judged to be the worse for the ambivalence of their use.

When Dryden writes of the 'goodly' ship London that 'She seems a sea-wasp flying on the waves', his nemesis Elkenah Settle tells him outright that he only makes 'his humble comparison of a wasp more ridiculous, [when] he does not say it flies upon the waves as nimbly as a wasp, or the like, but it seemed a wasp.' If the boat isn't like a wasp, why then say that it 'seems' to look like one, idiot. Thus Settle to Dryden. And certainly Bowles could appear to be just as stupidly uncertain. There he is, standing about in some enchanted spot, his facial features screwed up with unseemly concentration, listening intensely to decide whether the wind seems like sorrow or if it really is sorrow's plaint.

What the young Coleridge would have admired in these lines from Bowles is the recession from a maximum demand as the linguistic realisation of its possibility. If poetry is to have once again the beauties of the fancy, for decades now cheapened by advances in sector productivity, it must first of all revive the language of seeming, of apparition, delusion and misprision. The psychological reality of hesitation is a prophylactic against the generic literary implausibility of certitude. To hear sorrow's plaint on the wind requires the advance admission that perhaps we hear nothing of the sort. There will be no real transition to maximum demands until the proletariat believes that its immediate demands will not continue to be met.

The basic problem faced by Trotsky, and indeed by every revolutionary thinker active in the 1940s, however much they might have resented the Fourth International, and no matter how much they cared or didn't care for August Thalheimer, was the same problem revolutionaries face today. How can the obvious fact of the mass suffering produced by capitalist relations of social reproduction induce in the victims of that suffering both the will and the means for the creation of new and better relations of social reproduction? It is more than a stubborn question, and Trotsky's retreat to the metaphor of a bridge is of course entirely vague and impressionistic. The transitional demands within the Transitional Programme are not properly articulated concepts

but are in fact only the deliberate expression of the insufficiencies of minimal and maximum demands as the tradition of Social Democracy had defined them. Trotsky's 'slogans' for a sliding scale of wages and public works are in truth perfectly basic. The sliding scale of wages is not stuck at a billion bucks an hour; the workers will not work for 30 minutes per day erecting golden leisure pyramids for their own use during the time that remains.

More deeply rooted in this line of thought are two problems more relevant to poetry. The first is, how can the possibility of a larger and greater struggle be made superincumbent on the necessary struggle for the minimal conditions of life, as a bridge is superincumbent on its abutments? The second question is, how can individual conceptions of demands be contorted and distressed to resemble the collective action in relation to which those individual conceptions fall short?

William Bowles' answer to these questions, made at the exact historical moment when the creditable possibility for plebeian seizure of political power was spreading to spots as distantly remov'd from Paris as Port d'Envaux and La Rochelle, if not yet to Northumberland or the Shetlands, is very directly concerned with the problem of the value of the object that the maximum demand repudiates. He writes:

I listen to the wind
And think I hear meek sorrow's plaint

The person who situates herself between a minimum and a maximum demand, who hesitates at the border of ecstasy and 'thinks' that she hears what she knows she does not – this person does not 'find a bridge' to an otherwise unattainable maximum but only the terrific and glaring confusion of bad language every day straining against the rope of its enabling syntax and lexicon. Each graze that the rope inflicts is another mark of the spuriousness of the 'interiority' whose architecture always comes from outside.

A transitional demand can only be made of an object which someone (the professional revolutionary, or the avant-garde) knows in advance to be incapable of meeting it; and the demand that we make on an object that we understand in advance is incapable of meeting it can lead only to disappointment. Disappointment is the fate of that demand, unless we expect (as revolutionaries do expect) the object to be incinerated in the heat of what we need from it, and to throw up from its ashes like a phoenix a new and greater object in its place: communism. The opposite of a transition so defined is a fluctuation, a movement in feeling or desire away from an object which determines that movement and determines also a subsequent return.

Let's try to firm up that distinction. In 1923 the reactionary comedian G.K. Chesterton placed a maximum demand on a potato. 'A potato', wrote Chesterton, in dispute with all traducers of the magnificent phrase, 'is a poem'. Not only that,

it is even an ascending scale of poems; beginning, in subterranean grotesques in the gothic manner, with humps like the deformities of a goblin and eyes like the beast of revelation, and rising up though the green shades of the earth to a crown that has the shape of stars and the hue of heaven.²

Chesterton was a more prolific but also a more stupid writer than Bowles. In this, his oafish *ars potato*, the great virtue of language, and of stately versified language in particular, is that it can never be said in principle to break down under an 'immediate' demand. There is not, and there never can be, an occasion for transition. Not only does communism fail to supersede the root vegetable; the root vegetable is a drainless source of pleasure and amusement.

² G. K. Chesterton, 'The Slavery of Free Verse', in *In Defense of Sanity: The Best Essays of G. K. Chesterton*, Eds. Dale Ahlquist, Joseph Pearce, Aidan Mackey, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011, p.156.

Heaven can be abstracted from the top of a Maris Piper; infinity from the tray of a vending machine; please call Shermco Ltd. Customer Services for thousands of years of immeasurable bliss. There is – this is, of course, the point – no way to determine a limit to these promises. Linguistic reality is ‘magnificently’ apt to be manipulated. Invention is inexhaustible. Brecht, Chesterton would have thought, was an idiot when he wrote in his disastrously prosaic lyric to German proletarian housewives that ‘your condition is bad/It will worsen’; for how could it be so, when each housewife could gaze forever through the glittering window of a soap bubble, onto landscapes that pulse behind their sheet of shifting light with the same measure as the heart, towards a sky that beckons with the ardour of love and the tenderness of solace?³

Chesterton is capital’s door-to-door salesman of maximum demands. With magnificent phrases, any object can be made to sustain any demand. Transition is transcendently redundant. Bowles’ poem by contrast makes perception fluctuate to accommodate for a plausible transition in the object. We are now, I hope, beginning to centre on the modern ersatz in individual expression for those collective transformations of social relations that individual experience is powerless to accomplish. And now, a thought experiment: imagine that Trotsky’s ‘bridge between present demands and the programme of the socialist revolution’ is literal. The bridge is bought by a state using taxation revenue and loans. In consequence of the use of this bridge, or of many bridges like it, capital begins to circulate faster in the economy. As it does so, profits in firms begin to rise. Increasing profits lead to new investments – what Marx would call in Volume II of *Das Kapital* the capitalisation of part of the surplus – which generate further employment and, in consequence, economic expansion.

³ Bertolt Brecht, *Die Gedichte von Bertolt Brecht in einem Band*, Eds. Elisabeth Hauptmann and Rosemarie Hill, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981, p.461. My English approximation.

As the demand for labour increases relative to its supply, wages begin to rise also, as Adam Smith prognosticated even in 1776, when he wrote his chapter of *The Wealth of Nations* dealing with wages as an attack on the false and self-interested doctrines of employers. Rising living standards for workers will cause increased consumption of consumer goods, and so a further advance in revenue and profit for employers. States, possessed of an enlarged revenue, will create more bridges, more social amenities, and new and as yet unconceived forms of human communication. The bridge between minimum and maximum demands is a literal bridge; its 'identification' is not revolutionary; it requires no proletarian intervention except the intervention of the proletarians who build it.

This is the thought experiment: tell me, right now, why this cannot happen.

Given where we are, and who we are, and the topic of our conversation, I make the assumption that you will wish strongly to disagree with my statement about infrastructure. Infrastructure is not capable of banishing the need for a revolution against capitalist social relations; the account of growth I have provided is like no growth on the face of this earth; the image convicts real economic growth as the malignant blemish that it in fact is. Getting communism out of a thought experiment is no easier than getting heaven out of a potato, or it is just as easy, which is the same thing. But if you are like me, or like William Lisle Bowles, listening to this wind will cause you to have a particularly plaintive and sorrowful kind of experience. The experience will be something close to panic. As I listen to arguments like this, I find myself 'a little embarrassed and confounded'. As I struggle to resist the conclusions to which the argument seems to lead, I search to find the weakness in its links. The argument must be false. A philosopher might say that the argument, though it is internally coherent, is based on false premises. But this is not my experience of it. The argument has no premises that I can know, its concepts are undefined, and at best it derives its authority from a suite of macroeconomic assumptions in which we its addressees can be more or less well instructed.

I will put all this another way. As you listen to the argument, you will first feel a slight panic. Once you have stood your ground, you will know that the argument is meaningless. The basic demand that you will place on the argument is this, that it contain meaning; and that the argument does not contain meaning, but only a set of concepts whose relation seems to be implied by a 'formalistic' logic belonging to bourgeois economics, does not prevent the argument from acquiring that meaning at some later date. We only need to start to define our terms.

Are you still with me?

But the provisional sense of the meaninglessness of this argument, the knowledge that, right now, it fails to meet your basic demand, will not yet stop another more impetuous desire from asserting itself, the desire to place a greater, a maximum demand on the 'object' that this argument is, namely, the demand that it not only prove itself to be meaningful, but that it prove itself possible too, here on the face of this earth and with these social relations now. At that moment the transitional demand that you made on an argument which, you knew in advance, could not meet the demand on its own terms, fades out, and in its place glows a new demand and another object, and this object is not a meaningless argument about economic growth but real relations of capitalist production and exchange.

If this account of your experience is at all accurate, you have in it something like Trotsky's bridge. Unlike Trotsky's bridge, however, this thing in your experience will not lead from 'immediate' to 'maximum' demands but back from a maximum demand whose articulation against a social relation is not so much fantastical as absolutely misconstrued. Have we identified, in the poetry of the '89er William Bowles, and in the misconstrual of the demands which an argument might sustain, the experience of a transition? No. Life, writes the Nazi mortician Gottfried Benn, is bridge-building. In the precincts of bourgeois interiority, a bridge is built, arched in cathexis towards a plateau made of blood. On top of it, at the point to which your maximum demand carries you, there is a lozenge.

Climb through it. On the other side of the lozenge you discover your minimum demand. This transition is not the transformation of reformist into revolutionary consciousness, and still less is it the shattering of an object under the weight of a demand that it must pre-empt and obviate if it is to survive; it is, instead, the literary experience of that ceaseless fluctuation that in capitalist experience has no better model than the fluctuation of a market price around a fixed value whose ultimate determination is abstract socially necessary labour time, or, if we retrench on those syllables, in accordance with the deficit reduction plan of positivist consciousness, work. William Bowles' poem is one of the first places in the language where disenchantment is euphemised into the fluctuation of promising incertitude, expressive personhood not so much traded on the bourse as materially derived from it. The wind brings news of *laissez faire*.

Collectivity is the ulterior impulse of individual fluctuations in feeling. Reactionaries like G.K. Chesterton, reminiscing on the Great Irish Potato Heaven, know this better than we do. In their work, fluctuations are played off against their ulterior impulses in a traffic of thought whose prospective security is held in the knowledge that each move made for the outer rim of desire is destined to be pulled back into line, just as each 'aberration' in prices is forever if unpredictably liable to be corrected. The poetry that opposes this logic (now the most basic logic of all) has to cut right into the heart of these demands, their fluctuations, and the collective social relations that constitute their essential unity, right into the centre of correction; or, in fact, as it may be, the centre for correction, in which all mere aberrations of feeling are destined to be incarcerated.

Note

This text is reproduced from Danny Hayward, *People*, Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2013, with the kind permission of the author.

Pier Paolo Pasolini

Job Application

Poetry to order is ordnance.*
The ordnance-maker may produce a lot
(procuring only weariness from the manual labour).
The object may sometimes be ironic,
The ordnance is always so.
Gone is the time when I, a greedy saver,
spent everything, investing my cents (many,
because they were my seed and I was always erect)
buying into cheap cheap areas
that would pay off in two or three centuries' time.
I was Ptolemaic (being a kid)
and counted eternity precisely, in centuries.
I considered the Earth the centre of the world,
poetry the centre of the Earth.
All of which was fine and logical.
And why should I have doubted
that everyone else was like me?
But then they all turned out to be much better than me
and I was shown up as a man of inferior breed.
I responded in kind
and understood that I no longer wished to write poems. But now,
now that the calling is vacant
– but not the life, not the life –
now that inspiration, if it comes, produces no verses,
please take note that I am hereby available
to supply poetry to order: ordnance!

Translator's notes

* Reasons for rendering 'ordigno' (countable; plural: 'ordigni') as 'ordnance' (uncountable; always 'ordnance' however much of it there is) rather than 'bomb' (countable, 'bombs') are compelling though not unassailable. I wouldn't object to any translator's preference for 'bomb'. But the analogy starts from 'poesia'/'poetry' (uncountable), and the sound/syllabic form of the word is played on from the start and then a few lines later ('oggetto'/'ordigno'). Also, 'bomb' lends itself to glib figurative usage (eg. media revelation of a scandal is a 'bomb', fiscal deficit, ageing population or household recycling delinquency is a 'time-bomb', etc.), whereas 'ordigno'/'ordnance'

acknowledges the military derivation of the real explosives and the fanciful metaphors, as in Pasolini's implicit reference to (e.g.) Piazza Fontana. (Note: whatever their other defects, the 'left' armed groups of the same period (loathed by PPP, who hated the entire extra-parliamentary left) disdained plastic explosive: even the *Brigate Rosse* thought it a 'fascist' weapon morally (or aesthetically?) beneath them, unlike, say, kneecapping.)

Translation by Neinsager.

Note

The original poem is available, <http://pamelablog.wordpress.com/category/pier-paolo-pasolini/>

Lisa Robertson

On Form

(for Jane Ellison)

You could say that form is learning
you can see form take shape
at the coronal suture's first arcade
it's explaining it's appearing
it's unestranged from enormity's
prick of a spiny plant like a rose as
experimenting it's bursting and
usually it's repeating why is form
a dog as a horse as a deer as a
fish and a bramble a grater rapacious
the second cervical vertebrae is
repeating is a question we can
ask with our bodies and what is
a tooth coccyx is the beak of an ancient
dove below the sacrum the tip of
the sacrum places in the person a
sensation of slow form repeating it
doesn't require its own skin to repeat
fox a foxtail a lizard as psoas
a small flask of modern oil at the throat
the repeat carries between bodies
what's made in this space are theories
and thymus a rising of beneficial
smoke as thorax as guitar the hairs
exact and between bodies form's not
ever without a stupendous body so
the repetition is never exact
this is why form is always learning
how as it moves across surfaces
on the cleft above the lips to be

repetition is never exact this is why
form is learning or becoming or how
as it moves across timely surfaces
including the intricately folded surfaces
sucked when kissing sometimes the lower
lip has a crease like a waking girl in
the real territory of the conceptual
the liver is a crown and it is a vessel
it constitutes our life form is folding
the full part is a vase the nostril is
cartilage connecting mineral salts
the root of the belly the palate a
celestial dome a vault a sky a
nylon-like connecting dissolving
palace the tongue is a stitch a root a
complex tissue made of crystalline constituents
as freefloating folds motivating
intestines as a nest the bowel is
blind the rectum founds it all the anus
is a ring a door a precipice the
nervous system orients vast complexities
to make them even less efficient we're
trying to solve efficiency luckily
sphincter's a crow the liver's a
table a summit a choir a door the
tracheal artery is a country
flute the lungs are apples each part of the
heart is named differently but
it seems to be prettily resisting
generally heart is a vase with little
ears the spinal column is a canal
out towards the periphery and also
of marrow the thorax is also a
tortoise and a stall the ribs are fronds and
these are also in the same lake

they are spades the greater ribs are boats they
are maritime together the ribs form
a kind of anywhere-ness and anyone-ness
the teeth of a comb which is not only
a grooming implement but a tool for
their role as relations in a behaviour
as weavers the ribcage then their loom the
shoulder blades are plates and they make writing
pads or little desks these desks are winged
when our hands feel empty they are not empty
the clavicles are keys and they close and
open the gate between the throat and
sweetly there was a suture there
touch is a really unstable compound
metaphor but it does have a head the
radius is a tailor or a drum
stick a brooch and historically a hinge
the hand is a rustic cheeseplate the
same for the feet the fingers are a phalanx
of snakes or of fishes the skin is treebark
in this place the voice is touching you
it comes to a physiological
work this is a representational
problem something like memory
work this is a transformational work
about the domestic nature economy
sufficient yet imperceptible
it is medicinal the cheeks are melons
are bowls or concepts or clods the stomach
is a mouth nostrils are the lairs of little
animals or fish choirmaster names them
indistinguishable from anarchy
every cell's means of turning every
thing into transcendent operatic
the heart as well as the liver we can

compare the liver to a city or
a mansion and the intestines are the
market gardens surrounding it the veins
are roads leading up to the city gates
no proper limit no verbal chain continually altering
the cardiac veins are wee snakes the ear's
continually altering internal conditions
a measuring cup and a conch it
is among the kitchen utensils
between our nerve endings and our motor units
like the female sex that thrives behind
the earlobe there is a bony poppy
fucking wildly at the edge of capital
this experience can constitute a break
in sincerity density and scale
the helix of the ear is a bracelet
the ear is also a hive it produces
wax which is a humour it is the nest
of a swallow as well the eye sockets
are basins for washing grain the eye is
carnival artifice intrigue
wandering's root the eyeball like a sun
like a cheek like a breast the white of the
eye is a riverpebble the glance is
a throw of stones the iris is a rain
on this conceptual meta-membrane
ah luxuriant nomad pubis
the eyelid is skirt the eyelashes are
the outer surface of the mind that
album berry or nymph pip barleycorn hill
or sparrows completely and ardently
send their action thriving foray touch
this suture right now

A Coat

dozens of watches
yards of linen
tons of iron
bootpolish silk or gold
a table a house a piece of yarn
a coat and ten yards of linen
iron linen corn
twenty yards of linen and one coat
the value of the linen and the value of the coat
the coat is directly with the linen
such as linen brings to view

The coat takes the position
such as a coat
coat or maize or iron etc.
linen etc.
20 yards of linen or one coat
one coat for example
one coat varies
the coat equated with the linen
worth one coat
in one coat
in 20 yards of linen
in which the coat is the linen
& the linen looks like the coat
its buttoned-up appearance as a thing
the equivalent of the linen
instead of the coat

So vested
I looked around for something out of which matter could be formed

moral evil, chastity, suicide, knowledge of literature, poetry, highway robbery, food, concubinage, usury, kings, liberty, games, war, plague

I made a list of these things
that is: nothing apart from the Gushing Abdicating Bilius Live Body

the pools of bile glistening on the floor of the operating theatre
beneath the heavenly blue lamps

sometimes simply *those* laws since
no community is for a body

thus the proposition

But I think poetry is nice
because of my body
the insurrection of my unplaced body I mean
on sodden space of groaning porch
so as a clothier I must ask
what kind of unlikely coat is cut from 20 yards of linen?

And the enjoyable gland also
dribbles a politics
for its friend

The equivalent form of a body does not imply
that the magnitude of its value can be determined
for the body of the friend is commodious only
and so extinguishes all named commodities
rather than exchanging. I will be its gyrish receiver
and nothing more. Our own relations
speak and sew with a motion like a circulation
sliding and sticking with the pleasure of a freshening

it is amazing that it should be so difficult
to simply know her commodiousness
commodious as balenciaga I would say
therefore with no equivalent
gownly it simply stands alone and beckons
as would the enormous marxian coat minus certainty
it seems unbelievable and fancy
as in the non-abstract frequency-receiving gesture of beginning

When you proceed to measure a person
first request her to button her coat that
you may better discern her shape and position
then place the end of the measure to the
top of the back-seam or where you intend
the top of the back-seam to be and
extend it to the required length of the waist
say 16 inches continue it to
the length at bottom say 36 inches
next require the person to bend her arm
while you take the length of the sleeve from the
back-seam to the elbow 19 inches
and from the elbow to the hand making
33 inches then take the length of
the lapel by placing the measure at
the top of the back-seam and pass it over
the breast to the length required at front
21 inches then take the size of
the breast 18 inches and the belly
16 1/2 inches the top of
the arm 7 inches below the elbow
6 inches at the hand 5 inches the
sizes of the sleeve are taken 2 inches
from the top of the fore-arm-seam 2 inches
below the elbow and the same distance
from the bottom.

Between the neck and the collar-bone
from the inmost parts
and what the difference is between
obscenity and the museum
this is what happened

Friend, there is no community. She either had a beginning or she had not.
Of shapely pleasure she spoke
the techniques of new shapes
which broke the materia medica

The proposition dissolved in the vicinity of these
sunken pools and chandeliers
bought by the same purchasers

It seems unbelievable
as when there is a tree and you try to hear it
and the sensation of behindness
into the midst of which you have been plunged
shows equilibrium as inimical to life

Skepticism is fragile
as when you mime what you perceive
like a voluntary intuition
that ripples from body to friend
if the seam is a rhythm

As permanent gesticulation in uncertain scale
as reviscent motor element
into the midst of which she has been plunged semiologically so
my organism hankers

She made her muscles into thoughts:
Especially her facial muscles liked
a well-stacked wood-shed

I do this because it's more portable than sewing.

The community therefore is a mechanism that, after being set in motion, performs with its goal an exchangeable simulacrum whose component parts make the lucid clicking of value
as water down an incline
as windmill to wind
nor cease to change its form
beyond inevitably insurrectionary motions of specific elaborate perfumeable bodies like hers
nor eliminate transcendent contradiction
as a machine has a bitter history
they bait with honey
for bodies do not pass away but they can
all golden plummy trembling sad
as in the theatres we see
and deeply deploy
friendship and enmity
when did the image become a machine?
before, when it was preposition
entirely emancipated as
free external motion
between timely adjectival bodies linked by moving postures
it will subsist invisible
outside the circuit and its stages
we must conclude that there is no image
that the friend's body
speaks through her mouth
as transcendent movement succulent

what the political will be to her
cannot be limited
there is only a body where there is my friend on the porch
fearfully I know this to be
because there is no general body on the porch
there is no general body in the car
no general friend

a green dress coat cut very scantily with very narrow lapels
the sleeves very large at top and tight in the arms
the shoulders very narrow
the collar of velvet ascends very high on the neck and the crease rolls
over like a horse-collar
flaps are worn at the waist
the coat is cut across the waist – it is a new system of cutting
a waist-coat of white Marcella, single breasted with a stand-up collar
a blue dress coat with gilt buttons and velvet collar
a fancy under-vest with a blue under-vest
a green dress coat with a fancy velvet vest and a blue under-vest
a wide French braid down the front edges around the collar with five
volutés of braid down each side of the breast
double breasted frock cut quite plain except the lapels and the collar
six buttons down each lapel, the collar short and buttoned-up under
the chin

Yes, I love Literature
But what I love about it is
The reproductive organs of Capital.
– Anne Boyer, *Ma Vie en Bling:*
Free Poems 2006–2008

When critique becomes caught up in a dialectical stabilisation of what it criticises a moment of crisis arises. We become aware of the fact, that saying NO with regard to a phenomenon binds us negatively to it, makes it important, even canonises it and finally reproduces it as a phenomenon of value. Should we mourn denuded critique as we mourn our alienation from original intention? Should we stop loving critique? Are there other possible consequences and questions stemming from the crisis of critique?

To further examine these questions one might start from critical art as a privileged site for the experience of a crisis of critique. In art theory since the 1970s the observation has been repeatedly made that critique risks becoming assimilated by its object. In his book, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière even wonders about a crisis of art emerging from its neutralisation.

The proliferation of voices, denouncing the crisis of Art, or its fatal capture by discourse, the pervasiveness of the spectacle or the death of the image suffice to indicate that a battle fought yesterday over the promises of emancipation and the illusions and disillusion of history continue today on aesthetic terrain.

The trajectory of Situationist discourse – stemming from the avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of disenchanted discourse that acts as the ‘critical’ stand-in for the existing order – is undoubtedly symptomatic for the ebb and flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformation of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia.¹

Let us add to the listed complaints; the canonisation of revolutionary avant-gardes into a depoliticised academic canon, the failure of the social utopia of modern architecture in colonial spaces, and that the global status of radical theory, such as Rancière’s, which developed out of the street battles, strikes and occupations of ’68, or anti-institutions like the London Anti-University, has become part of the historical canon of academia. Another example would be the way institutional critique led to a vital dynamics of the criticised institutions instead of their abandonment or abolition. And, more recently, the disappointment with the results of the activism of Occupy Wall Street hints toward the unrecognised effects of a critique which continuously displaces its intentions. A critique of critique seems necessary. We need to become conscious of the ways critique disturbs the identity of its task and comes to be displaced in practice. Does the practise of critique transform the parameters of critique?

A critique of critique is a meta-critical gesture and allows us to glimpse something like a paradox of critique. It seems necessary to turn to Kant’s critiques of pure reason, practical reason and judgement to clarify what is paradoxical about critique. Let us have a closer look at the paradoxical aestheticising and legislative side effects which empower critique and simultaneously deprive it of its power. Perhaps we can grasp them by better understanding how Kant binds experience to critique.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, (Trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp.3-4.

According to Kant critique is an epistemological operation, one that searches out the legitimate limits of our knowledge. Kant offers a certain solution to the endless dispute about what is real and what is not. By replacing the real with the objective, and the unreal by the subjective united by a coherent field of experience, Kant established a limit up to which knowledge legitimately can be titled human. The belief in the reality of god falls outside this field of experience because it cannot be objectified. The unconditioned access to the real also falls outside this field of knowledge because it fails to account for the faculties of the subject, which has, on the one hand, limited capacities of perception and, on the other, unlimited capacities for imagination. The field in which the subject is capable of objectifying his experience and sharing it intersubjectively became the field of enlightened knowledge and the form of empirical access to the world.

In light of modern experience Walter Benjamin diagnosed a crisis of experience that disrupts the coherent field of knowledge which Kant's critique had granted us.² Benjamin accepts Kant's critique of experience grounded in the thesis that our knowledge of the world is distorted by the character of our faculties. For instance, we experience colour though optics teach us that there are no colours. Rather than opening up a pre-Kantian discussion about the question of whether colours are real or unreal, instead we can legitimately and critically say that in accordance with our subjective faculties we objectively see colours. Though natural sciences insist, that a coloured universe is a universe distorted by our senses, Benjamin goes a step further and points out that modern experience allows us to experience the distortion together with the distorted object. From the very start modern experience is an experience of alienation.

² Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol.2*, Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge Mass., London: Belknap Press, 1999, pp.729-736.

We know what we know through experience's helplessness – being ungrounded, rootless in the nature of things. But we learn something from that fact: and that is the incompleteness of our experience, its non-absolute character, which implies an absolute. Of course, our experience cannot grasp this absolute but we experience it in its negativity. Thus critique is immanent to modern experience.

The crucial point is this, critical experience negates the possibility of experience as such. It is anti-aesthetic inasmuch as aesthetics is grounded in experience. We know the experience of being alienated, being incomplete, being excluded, being impossible. If Kant were right, and all what we could say about the state of things could be said only in accordance with our faculties, the experience of alienation would be impossible. Alienation therefore necessarily transgresses or moves the limits of our faculties.

Benjamin's idea is that, by assuming a delimitation of our experience, one inevitably presumes something limiting our experience from the outside. If this outside were nothing it could not limit our experience and our experience would turn out again to be absolute. Alienation is a state of experience to which critique is immanent and which presumes the task of changing the conditions of experience.

In his second attempt to extend Kant's concept of experience Benjamin turns the transcendental *apriori* of all experience into a speculative one. Instead of thinking the transcendental conditions of the possibility of our experience he thinks about how conditions come to be possible. His argument is as follows: conditions had to be contingent in order to be possible (i.e. contingency turns out to be the speculative condition of 'the conditions of possibility').

The 'poetic' ('*Gedichtete*') as developed by Benjamin does something for us that aesthetics as such cannot achieve. As Howard Caygill writes, the poetic unites the absolute, which lies outside of our experience with intuition which is immanent to our experience.

‘The “Poetic” is a speculative concept which synthetically unites the absolute (“spiritual order”) with spatio-temporal experience (“intuitive order”).’³ *Poiesis* is the making of something that opens up a space for truth. As a Marxist, conditions of what might be possible are not for Benjamin a matter of a spiritual order. They are not *apriori* givens, but have arisen as possibilities out of the very specific conditions of the process of production and technological progress since the industrial revolution.

Modern experience, for Benjamin, is characterised by the fact that we experience the limits of our experience – for instance our limited sight in comparison to the camera-eye – as an alienation from the phenomenal world and from the objects of our knowledge. We experience the negativity, and in the end the impossibility and crisis, of experience itself. Benjamin calls for an acknowledgement of the poetic moment in production and forces us to admit that over the course of technological progress industrial production has changed the image of the world. Since, if it were our faculties that have produced this world, being Kantians we should be able to perceive ourselves in this image of industrial modernity. Why can we not?

In my interpretation a poetic unconscious underlies experience. During technological progress something has escaped the relation of subject and object legislated by aesthetics. The aesthetic agreement, that we objectively experience colours, is undermined by cameras that alienate our experience of colour. Instead, we begin to experience our experience as contingent, as something impossible or possible, and as potentially something new. In his essays Benjamin developed many concepts to grasp the point where experience encounters the poetic possibility unconsciously immanent to it. Concerning our visual experience the most famous of these concepts is the concept of the aura.

³ Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience*, London: Routledge, 1998, pp.35-36.

Concerning literature he names his concept of an encounter of the poetic and the possible – constellation – which describes an experience of reading something on the surface of things that never has been intentionally inscribed into it.

Why does this call for a poetics instead of critique?

Benjamin's answer has three aspects. First he deduces the new out of the difference between conditions and possibilities. According to Benjamin there can't be any difference between conditions and possibilities, except there *is* the possibility of something new. Otherwise the possibilities of our knowledge would just be conditions of knowledge yet unknown. Anything new is the task of a *poetics* (of making experiences, making a world, making the human). Secondly, according to Benjamin, the concept of critique makes sense only if it is at the same time a concept of the poetic. Of our experience Benjamin said that it could be limited only by something, not by nothing. Were there nothing outside our experience our experience would be absolute, and even if we experienced the absolute as the negativity of our own experience, the possibility of experience rests on overcoming the conditions of experience. So we can conclude, that out of the difference between possibility and conditions of experience, only the experience of something new would be a non-contradictory experience. And finally, at the outset of the concept of possibility, Benjamin can argue that the concept of *poiesis* can serve as the reason for the infinity of material thinking and therefore directs or leads the concept of *noesis*. Material thinking can take the form of action or of production, technological invention or art, speaking or writing. The infinity of the mind lies not in infinite reflection but in its *poietic* character, that is: thinking bears new knowledge. Speaking metaphorically, thinking is more than discovering *Amerika*, it is inventing the new world. One also might think of Kafka's story or Kruchenykh's futurist poetry.⁴

⁴ Franz Kafka, *Der Verschollene (Amerika)*, Jost Schillemeit (Ed.), Fischer: Frankfurt a.M., 1983; Aleksei Kruchennykh,

Sdvigologiya russkogo stikha [1922], in *Kukish proshlyakam*, Gileya: Moscow, 1992.

The possibilities opened up by the poetic are grounded in a complex temporality. In retrospect the technological progress and process of industrialisation in the course of the 19th century already implicitly contained shades of this new world not yet experienced. The crisis of experience finally cuts loose the binding of experience to tradition, its continuity through history and its transmission through storytelling.⁵ And the crisis of experience ultimately reveals that critique is immanent to experience.

Benjamin's Marxist analysis of the effects of production and technological progress, that have made critique immanent to experience and hitherto alienated, can be supplemented with two futural directions. One of these directions stems from the analysis of the social structure of power developed by Michel Foucault, where he describes, with reference to Kant, what an emancipatory practice of critique could be in our times. It consists in no longer defining the legitimate limits of our thinking and acting respectively, but rather in the search for existing limits in practice and in the task of crossing those limits. The second direction is a further analysis of the traps of critique built into the spirit of capitalism. Both of these analyses reckon with the historical epistemic background of critique as an epistemological operation immanent to experience.

Eve Chiapello and Luke Boltanski concentrate on critique as the major practice of contemporary art and are bothered by the similar observations as Rancière: despite the aspirations of artistic critique to intervene into the social consciousness it became repeatedly displaced under the regime of capital. As they note,

⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings Vol.2*, Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Cambridge Mass., London: Belknap Press, 1999, pp.729-736.

The artistic critique is currently paralysed by what, depending on one's view-point, may be regarded as its success or its failure.⁶

On the one hand artistic critique has succeeded by exceeding the confinement of minority cultures and avant-gardes after the second world war. Today artistic critique possesses networks and media presence. On the other hand,

It failed inasmuch as the liberation of desire has not sounded the death knell of capitalism, as heralded by Freudo-Marxism between the 1930s and the 1970s. Moreover, that belief entailed ignoring freedom's implications in the regime of capital and its profound complicity with desire, on which its dynamic to a great extent rests.⁷

By way of example one can compare the modes of production, that connect subjects and objects via experience under the regime of capital with the descriptions of their past socialist alternatives. By having a closer look at socialist object relations – as attempts to abandon capitalist object relations and critiques of the experience of alienation stemming from their presence – we can grasp their relation to desire and their aim for new kinds of objects. Ekaterina Diogat in her article '*Ot tovara k tovarishchu*' ('From Commodity to Comrade') has interpreted the Russian productivist aesthetics of things from an economical point of view as being marked by gendered desire.

The thing – '*veshch*' in Russian – is of a feminine grammatical form. We can see how the Soviet avant-gardes turned *gender* from a private, via a linguistic; an artistic and a cultural; to a political category, in the letters from Paris written by Alexander Rodchenko in 1925 to his lover, constructivist Varvara Stepanova, excerpts of which were published in the left periodical *Novy LEF*.

⁶ Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Verso, 2006, p.466.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.467.

[*Ex oriente lux*] The light is from the East [...] not only the liberation of the workers. [*Ex oriente lux*] The light is from the east – in a new relationship to man, to women and to things. Things in our hands should also be equal, also be comrades, and not these gaunt, black slaves, like they have here.⁸

The revolutionary conquest of estranged gender relationships cloaks itself in the image of the collective:

Things will become people's friends and comrades of man, and people will learn how to laugh and enjoy and converse with things.⁹

Class relations, gender relations and the relation to things are seen in the very same way and are subject to one and the same process of alienation through commodification. Critique is not enough. Since critique becomes assimilated by its object, new objects have to be produced in order to prevent the re-production of the old object relations. These new objects were the task of productivist art. They rest on the possibilities the new opens up for a changes in experience, as I have described it with the help of Benjamin's speculative poetics. The avant-garde's desire is an industrial one that attempts to free the workers, women and things through a speculative relation to the production of things. Hence, constructivist desire shapes the field between subjectivity and objectivity through artistic production of novel things, which I call *poiesis*.

In order to do this, things become subjectivised, i.e., they become comrades, brothers and lovers – while this is accommodated by the constructivist's objectivisation of himself.

⁸ Letter by Aleksandr Rodchenko to Vavara Stepanova from Paris, May 4, 1925. Modified from the English translation found in Alexander N. Lavrentiev (Ed.), *Aleksandr Rodchenko Experiments*

for the Future: diaries, essays, letters and other writings, Museum of Modern Art: New York, 2005, p.169.

⁹ Ibid.

Vladimir Merlin in his analysis of late socialist economy in his article, *Mashina udovletvoreniya* ('Machine of Satisfaction'), has described an abandoning of any desire for objects altogether. Desire was replaced with the idea of maximum satisfaction. The system of production, which was called upon to provide the socialist subject with an satisfactory object, Merlin names 'the machine of satisfaction'. Its Russian acronym sounds like 'MUDO' ('*Mashina UDOvletvoreniya*'). *MUDO* is opposed to money inasmuch as it is opposed to *mana*. *MUDO* carries with it the concept of unlimited material and inexhaustible ideal resources for the production of satisfaction. In addition to this the word *MUDO* tells us, that this economy of satisfaction is gendered. *MUDO* is a word which could be derived from the Russian term *mat*, the language of the suburban underground.¹⁰ It means something like the English slang word 'balls' – indicating a highly chauvinist economy. We also glimpse that *MUDO*, being a satisfactory object and subsequently a system of the production of satisfaction in itself, implies a certain type of value (neither money nor *mana*) that provides this satisfaction. The emphasis shifts from the object desired to the value enjoyed. An analysis of the experience of value appears that lies beneath the critical rejection of capitalist object relations. For the Soviet avant-gardes critique became immanent to experience and in socialist production it was consumed by its object. For late socialist experience the object became less and less important and shifted from an analysis of the desire for objects to the enjoyment of value.

¹⁰ *MAT* is the name for the suburban, vulgar, obscene language. *MAT* is a layer of Russian used exclusively in unofficial spheres of social life. From 1960s onwards *MAT* became a source for bohemian dissident literature. This language, called *MAT*, consists of curses, swears, insults, sexual indecencies etc. Nearly all synonyms for sexual organs belong to *MAT*, also drugs,

everything that concerns drinking and feasts, the repressed body. *MAT* is in itself an acronym of *mat* ('mother') and the shortcut for the most popular curse which is 'fuck your mother'. The speaker-communities of *MAT* consist mainly of male subjects. It was also the first language of Soviet gay culture.

Finally, from a post-socialist perspective, Boris Groys in his article *Die Sprache des Geldes* ("The Language of Money") calls for an understanding of the relation of the arts to value, i.e. an economical hermeneutics of the arts. In his words, 'really understanding a work of art would be to buy this art work' (*'ein Kunstwerk wirklich zu verstehen, bedeute, dieses Kunstwerk zu kaufen'*).¹¹ He criticises the modern economy of art as religious, determined by a pseudo-Christian mythology of money. The art market as a closed market for an initiated elite is opposed to the 'open market' for mass products. Groys endorses Baudrillard's and Bourdieu's suspicions about the 'minority-market' of the arts, that can survive independent of immediate success in the majority-market of mass-media. In their view only the majority principle of the mass market has democratic foundations. This mass market has much in common with *MUDO* as a system of production that is called upon to produce satisfaction or to postpone it in order to display desire. However, any artist making an aesthetical decision thereby inevitably chooses one of the markets. When thinking beyond this criticism the opportunity of choice is telling. It is remarkable that by choosing a market instead of choosing an object the same shift from the experience of an object to the experience of value takes place. Think of Duchamp's readymades to imagine the confusion when one chooses not between two objects but between two markets, that provides identical objects with different values. From a post-socialist point of view, one no longer looks on the production of objects but focusses on the complicity of the subject's experience with the type of value called capital. Groys obviously does not identify art with a commodity any longer but with a secondary type of market which rests upon the production of another currency and aims for another type of the circulation of value.

¹¹ Boris Groys 'Die Sprache des Geldes', in Wolfgang Weitlaner (Ed.), *Kultur, Sprache, Ökonomie*, Vienna/Munich, 2001 pp.247-257, p.250.

Perhaps one could say that it entails another type of acceleration, one that understands circulation of value as recursion and is aware of the gaps and opportunities for progress that emerge in reproductive cycles. What we need to understand about this is what kind of capital the arts reproduce by being experienced and produced by being bought and sold. What kind of reproductive organ of capital is literature? And what kind of capital do the arts produce? Benjamin in his famous text on *The Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* had situated the writer as a producer by situating them (all writers) amongst journalists.¹² He did so because he focused on a critique of the production of things and the way we relate to objects through our experience. However, he had seen that an experience of crisis made explicit the ways critique was internalised into experience and into its objects in the capitalist and socialist systems of production. The shift in the emphasis from production to reproduction offers another perspective: can reproduction change the experience of things and also the experience of value? After we have learned from Benjamin how the reproduction of art changed art could we ask today, what does the reproduction of capital do to capital? By analogy with human reproduction, the result of reproduction is much more unpredictable than the results of production and outcomes of the circulation of capital are. Family planning, domestic care and educational systems can't predict the biography of a child as sufficiently as a production plan can write the biography of the object (Tret'yakov) or the graph of an investment fund can project the biography of money. Individual reproduction and the reproduction of social systems (Niklas Luhmann) remind us far more of operations of speculation. We know the result of reproduction never being a clone inasmuch as we know that repetition produces difference (Deleuze). This difference is an object of speculation and perhaps one could call it the true content of literature.

¹² Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, (Trans. Anna Bostock), London: New Left Books, 1973, pp.85-104.

Literature as a reproductive organ of capital entails a speculative poetics. Nevertheless speculation can be (re)turned into an object of exploitation as we can observe in financial speculation that in many ways has replaced the Keynesian concept of value creation through circulation that inspired most of the last century's economics. The circulation of value, especially in its pure financial forms of investment and credit implies speculation on the future. It is an open question whether speculative literature and poetics can oppose the exploitation of contingency in financial speculation.

Groys calls for the writing of a history of aesthetical revolutions as the inventions of new systems of circulation of objects and value (markets) and the task to become conscious about them. 'In reality the market, the money, is not just the most recent/new form of language, through which the absolute speaks to us, but it is also a language in which we can articulate our selves as well, or even better than ever, but without being conscious about it.'¹³ In this form of speculative unconsciousness again the absolute speaks through the arts and recalls to us Benjamin's Speculative Poetics. It brings together the poetic understanding of speculation and the financial understanding of speculation. This coincidence becomes explicit when critique becomes immanent to the arts and makes it explicit that a crisis of art is as much the result of critique immanent to experience as financial crisis is the result of the appropriation of critical operations by capital.

Crisis is also repeatedly reproduced as a situation to which the production of a certain type of capital is intimately related. We remember from the financial crisis of the late 1920s and from the subsequent crises that they are the privileged space-time for the appearance of speculative capital. Financial crisis was, and still is, often described as *the* accelerating spiral of speculation.

¹³ Boris Groys, op. cit., p.257. Author's translation of the German original: 'In Wirklichkeit ist der Markt, ist das Geld aber nicht allein die neueste aller Sprachen, in denen das Absolute zu

uns spricht, sondern auch eine Sprache, in der wir uns artikulieren können – und das sogar immer schon tun, ohne uns dessen allerdings ausreichend bewusst zu sein.'

Financial speculation rests on the classical systems of the circulation of capital such as the mass market and the credit system, and exploits the differences in the reproduction of capital that these systems entail. The differences are nevertheless contingent. They remain highly unpredictable and hardly controllable.

Our task could be to use crises first of all to develop our understanding of speculation. I would further like to argue for a speculative poetics that makes way for a philosophical analysis of speculation, that literature gives us already as an experience. This poetic experience is yet to be understood in its capacities to open up a space for truth and the possibilities speculation entails should be evaluated in their capacities for political action.

Note

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Anne Boyer

Questions For Poets

'What is the answer?' Stein asked, and when no answer came she laughed and said: 'What, then, is the question?'

So many questions.

– Bertolt Brecht. 'Questions from a Worker Who Reads'¹

What is the direct trial that is today?² Is it to end the 20th century or end the 21st century or to end all centuries? Is it the trial of survival? Is it austerity? Is it surveillance? Is it the terrorist-romantic relation?³ Is it the wage relation? Is it the unwaged relation? Is it the furnace of affliction?⁴ Is it the womb of fire?⁵ Is it the grim work of mimesis, the paralysis of speculation, the soft disappointment of prefiguration?

¹ 'The young Alexander conquered India./ Was he alone? / Caesar defeated the Gauls. Did he not even have a cook with him? / Philip of Spain wept when his armada went down. / Was he the only one to weep?' Bertolt Brecht, 'Questions from a Worker who Reads' from Bertolt Brecht, *Poems 1913–1956*, (Trans. M. Hamburger), London and New York: Methuen, N.Y., London, 1976.

² 'The direct trial of him who would be the greatest poet is today.' Walt Whitman, 'Preface', *Leaves of Grass*, Philadelphia: David McKay, c1900.

³ 'Through the terrorist-romantic relation it has constructed between man and woman, capital tends continually to redirect the man's violence away from capital itself and towards repressing women's struggles.

It is a wedge that continually pushes in the direction of deepening the stratification of power within the class'. Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa, *The Work of Love: Unpaid Housework, Poverty and Sexual Violence at the Dawn of the 21st Century*, New York: Autonomedia, 2008.

⁴ 'Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.' Isaiah 48:10.

⁵ 'Believe me, if a thousand years thou bide within this womb of fire it cannot reave thy forehead of a hair.' Charles Gordon Wright, *The Purgatorio of Dante Alighieri Rendered Into Spenserian English*, London: Meuthen & Co., 1905.

Is it culture, capital, borders? Is it how to collapse a structure that will fall on our heads? Is it the direct trial that is today the ordinary trial, like the family court trial, the debtor's court trial, the criminal court trial? Is it the trial in which we enter the court as if boarding an enemy ship over which our own flag flies?⁶ Is it the trial of indeterminacy or is it the trial of what has already without us been determined? Or is it the trial of the opened body in the opened square under the opened sky in the opened streets in the opened city? Is it the trial of the indeterminacy

of events with the determinacy of action? Is it the trial of not stopping for regulation, of declaring oneself the president of regulation, of declaring an end to all presidents, all declaring, all regulation?⁷ Is it to make a memorial for an hour of pain, two hours of pleasure, eight hours of boredom, each night of worry, fifteen days of resistance, a decade of friendship, twenty minutes of violence? Is it to build the landscape in which our atomisation ceases? Is it to reclaim the terrain in which our care could multiply? Does it send new ships, to seek

what new feeling can be felt? Is it gymnastic? Is it in a startling cadence? Is it rhetorical? Does it take the form of inquiry? Does it throb with live interrogation? Does it immortalise when the poet lay in the green field with his head against the tree and Caesar's predecessors conquered the earth⁸ or does it immortalise when a woman writes *I have always been with the wretched and never given a living soul up to Caesar*?⁹ Is it a box of matches?¹⁰ Is it the last match in the box?

⁶ 'For us, every trial is a boarding of the enemy ship over which our flag flies.' Louise Michel, *The Memoirs of Louise Michel, The Red Virgin*, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 1981.

⁷ 'He does not stop for any regulation [...] he is the president of regulation. What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest.' Walt Whitman, 'Preface', *Leaves of Grass*, op. cit.

⁸ 'Time was when the poet lay in a green field with his head against a tree and played his

diversion on a ha'penny whistle, and, Caesar's predecessors conquered the earth, and the predecessors of golden Crassus embezzled, and fashions had their say, and let him alone.' Ezra Pound, 'Prolegomena', *Poetry and Drama* (then the *Poetry Review*, edited by Harold Monro), Feb. 1912.

⁹ Louise Michel, *The Memoirs of Louise Michel*, op. cit.

¹⁰ Ben Vautier, *Total Art Match Box*, 1966.



Ben Vautier, *Total Art Match Box*, c.1965

Is it the box of matches as an art object or a poem about the box of matches as an art object or a Facebook post about a poem about a box of matches as an art object? Is it the last match burning the art object, the poem, Facebook? Is it a box of matches burning the museum that displays the art object that is the box of matches? Or is

it the box of matches in the hands of a child who knows he is hated in his police-filled school in his police-filled city? Is it the incendiary accident of that child? Is it

how can language set fire to that? Is it how to set fire to fire? Is it the lighter in a girl's or woman's pocket or a lighter in the father's or the professor's or the poet's pocket? Is the trial of today a formal problem, its procedures and defences discernible though the thinking through of patterns and shapes and methods? Is it a book of rules written in an accountant's log, which holds the balance of numbers always weighted toward that which can't be accounted for by math? Is it a book of rules written in blood and fire?

Whose blood must the rules be written in? And whose tears will dampen the book's turning page? And what materials does the fire burn? And who will set it? Is it poet's-fire or an anarchist's or a white supremacist's or a prime minister's or a CEO's? Must the artists enter first that womb of fire? Is it the practice of the fun, the authentic, the intimate, the affective, the cooperative, the collaborative, the granted? Is it the practice of the quantified smile?¹¹ Is it the practice of a managed intimacy? Is it the practice of the scripted hello? Does

it grow in the ruins of authorship? Does it grow in the ruins of ruins? Is it that the right relation of an artist to a city is for a city to fiddle while the artist burns? And what is the trial of today if art has lived on after its failed self-abolition, aerosolised, manic and ambulatory, freed from the constraints of medium and modality, living on as a form of management, living on a form of flexi-feeling, living on in an already granted self-dissolution, living on as resilience in all the resilient horror? Would it find a compromise

in silence?¹² Might it make a clandestine opening of a thousand leaves?¹³ Is the trial of today to flood ourselves with the vast oceanic tides of the marketplace and false feeling and scripted hellos and the aerosolised and the ambulatory and shipping containers¹⁴ and social practice and

¹¹ 'A Japanese railway company, concerned that its employees may not be looking delighted enough to see passengers, has introduced "smile scanning" software to keep tabs on how enthusiastically they are grinning.' <http://www.theguardian.com/money/blog/2009/jul/07/japanese-smile-scanning>

¹² 'To shut up, even such risk / as the proper placement / of verbs and nouns. To free the spit / in mid-air, as it aims itself / at some valiant intellectual's face.' Leroi Jones, 'A Short Speech to my Friends', *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, Ed. William J. Harris, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000.

¹³ 

¹⁴ 'and actually, there are only / shipping containers, for the most part / the real x of fungible matter / merges into the keystone / of new products 3D-printed / from vats of pink, pseudopodal slime', Jasper Bernes, *We Are Nothing and So Can You*, Tenured Ninja, 2012.

smile scanners? Is it the vital and great, the epic, or the minor, the deprecated, the commodious, the scatological, the blithe or the charming? Is it a trial of weaponised data entry? Is it the testimony of pdfs? Is it code moving through the interstices of the engine?¹⁵ Is it all

the facts of corporeal sterility? Is it none of them? Is it the trial of today of the easy facts of fungibility and recuperation? Or is the trial to never blame what is recuperated for its recuperation?¹⁶ Is it to never blame singing for the commodification of song? Is it the trial that every once beautiful thing is trampled and every always miserable thing is extended and that it is neither the fault of the beautiful or the miserable for the trampling or the extending? Is it that there is no answer in and as poetry? And what is

the direct trial of this today for the poet if there has not yet been any poetry, any poetry? If what has gone on before us in the name of poetry has been in the service of tyrants and kings and presidents and CEOs? If it has been written into the clamoring silence of women and girls?¹⁷ If what is poetry cannot be written until the infinite servitude of women has ended?¹⁸ If it cannot be written until the property-less sensorium has arrived?¹⁹

¹⁵ 'To live with the machine is to become like a machine: a desexualised angel moving in the interstices of the engine, perfectly integrating work-space and life space as in the astronauts pod, infinitely weightless because purified of the force of gravity and of all human desires/temptations, the ancient refusal of work finally negated.' George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici, 'Mormons in Space', *Midnight Notes* (undated).

¹⁶ 'The lesson I draw from this is not that we should blame poetry or art for its recuperability. Anything is recuperable, I think. The failure lay in the fact that these challenges to the world never linked up with a force sufficient to realise them. There is no answer in and as poetry.' Jasper Bernes, email to the author, 19 March, 2014.

¹⁷ 'Dum Tacent Clamant', Cicero, 'First Catilinarian Oration'.

¹⁸ 'When the endless servitude of woman is broken, when she lives for and by herself, man – heretofore abominable – having given her release, she too will be a poet! Woman will find some of the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? – She will find strange, unfathomable, repulsive, delicious things; we will take them, we will understand them.' Arthur Rimbaud, Letter To Paul Demeny, Charleville, May 15, 1871.

¹⁹ 'The abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities.' Karl Marx, 'Private Property and Communism', *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

If it cannot be written till the revolution in its service has come? Is the trial of today that if there is no answer in and as poetry then all poetry till the revolution comes is only a list of questions? Or is it that all poetry till the revolution comes is only a list of questions and the answer to them is almost always 'no'? Is it to keep as a counter-poetry a record of each answer 'no'? To keep the least of these records, to keep the least of records of the least of records, to keep poetry as the least and smallest, that is as the record of being a person

or people who said no, to keep a precise or general record of the various texture of these noes, when they are smooth noes or rough ones, also a precise or general record of the subtly shifting qualities of these refusals, a record of the way the light falls on each refusal, sometimes a warm light, sometimes a cold one, these different lights falling on the no, the light which is subject to its own record, of time, of climate and climatic alterations, of the end or intermingling of season itself, of the shadows cast by buildings or the sunlight let

fall by the building's absences, the light falling on each no tinted by the water or the sea next to the no of no water at all? Is it to keep this smallest record of how each 'no' to each question proliferates inside of capital's terrible and glittering yes, inside capital's bloodless and touchless yes, to keep a record of the proliferation's explanation, to document the proliferation's demonstrations, to learn fully each lesson of proliferation, to study that the no proliferating and circulating through the terrible yes is also to hear a lecture on the nature of the no, of

who says it, the way the no and yes counter, what is weak about the no, what is weak about the yes, what is strong about both, too, and showing something of the weakness of the no and the yes also is it to study carefully and with great determination, with rigour and seriousness, the way any 'no' must be backed with the movement and force and accumulation of bodies? Is it to also remember not to blame what is not recuperated for its non-recuperation? To not blame what is ugly for its own ugliness? To not blame the fact

of sight for what we can't see? Is it to perceive what is subperceptual, to speak what is sublinguistic, to politicise what is subpolitical?²⁰ Is it to make materials of the speech of we who are never quite people fully but who have all the burden, all the pains of people: the eating and sleeping and being born and dying and labouring? Is to make materials of the speech of the speechless to make articulate the inarticulations of we who are not even animals, who are sub-animal for our wages, our rents, our smart phone contracts, our student debts?

Is it to find our first articulations, our basic patterns of overcoming in the repatterning of the sounds we already make?²¹ Is it that in our noises, our complaints, our indictments, our critiques, our narratives, our tears, our questions, a language that is the existent but unheard mostly or heard only as the small roar of doing-as-planned, as trying-our-best, as slyly-resisting, the undoing just enough, is it to make of our materials what remains a secret literature, what remains as a code in unattraction, to make of these materials what repulses and shudders off hands that would grasp

it and pull it into circulation, so that what might in circulation poison the very circulation, what might be the poison shirt that the terrible yes wears and adulterates itself by? Is it what we could make that is all of that and also is it whatever is backed by the force of bodies,

²⁰ 'Poetry investigates new ways for people to get together and do stuff in the open, in secret. Poetry enacts and tells the open secret. Getting together and doing stuff is a technical term that means X. Something going on at the sight and sound center of the sweet political form'. Fred Moten, 'Barbara Lee [the poetics of political form]' in *B. Jenkins*, Duke University Press, 2010.

²¹ 'Meanwhile our attempts to escape speechlessness were among the functions of our lives, the things we thereby found were first

articulations, they were basic patterns for overcoming muteness and measuring the steps into a cultural realm. Our idea of a culture rarely coincided with what constituted a gigantic reservoir of goods, of pent-up inventions and illuminations. As have-nots we initially approached the accumulations with anxiety, with awe, until it dawned on us that we had to fill these things with our own evaluations.' Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance: Volume 1 a Novel*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.

the arrangement of these bodies? Is it the trial the accumulation of adulterated bodies? Is it any body or only some of them? Is it the gathering of the adulterated, violable bodies, the penetrated bodies, into clusters of uninterest to data, into slices of quantifiable unbeing?

Is the trial of today against total information, against satellites encasing the earth, against data reconfiguring its forms? Is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers, large, well-united, proud?²² Or is it for the evergrowing communes of brothers and lovers infomaticised and diced, stored and surveilled? Is the trial of today a trial of cognitive distillation mainly, of algorithm and counter-algorithms? Is it the slow dripping or purifying or rendering of these materials? Is it the counter-planning of counter-rendering? And what is the direct trial of the today in a time when the sky is full of cop

at a time when there is no ground left to go under, at a time when a little sugar has been put on our lips but we are not allowed to lick them? What is the time when we are still hungry, with our friends, and still imagine before us the spread of the possible on the longest table? What is this today when we sing each other songs of such a feast we have imagined, and gather in cities to talk about the songs we sing of the feast we have wanted, and tell each other in the morning

the dreams of the table we had each night, but have never seen such a table, have seen only our most innocent and inchoate and clumsy and failed reaching for it? Will the longest table be that at which we will finally be rested, at which the children won't whine? Is it the table at which we will sit and know that death is made in the bedroom, in the kitchen, in the office, in the classroom, in the car, in the mall, in the museum, in the prison, or the table at which we can finally forget? And what

²² 'Are its disposals without ignominious distinctions? Is it for the ever growing communes of brothers and lovers, large,

well-united, proud beyond the old models, generous beyond all models?' Walt Whitman, 'Preface', *Leaves of Grass*, op. cit.

is the trial for the poet of the today, who knows that in the end each poem of the longest table is only as an infant's first word? And what of all ages in common, relieved of the parcelling of centuries, and what of the precise form of weeping of each epoch shall our weeping take? Is the only trial left to compose it as an elegy for disappearance or the disappearance of disappearance? Is it to end the future or begin it? Is it the touch of action? Is it the journey into unattainable regions? Is it the professionalisation

of plunder? Is it a sincere radicalism shaped to professional specifications? Is it a glib radicalism shaped to professional specifications? Is it the trial of what can be put to administrative uses? Or is it subterranean forms of refusal, a thousand excuses, a thousand invented illnesses, a thousand slow responses, a thousand unsmiled smiles, a thousand forgotten tasks? Is it the open laying out of charges and the battle that is also openly declared? Is it the struggle against the centres of luxurious cities? Is it the noise of riots ascending above the cities'

loftiest towers? Is it the noise of the overturning of buses, the ripping off of glasses from pink faces, the hurling of desktops, the deleting of files, the breaking of fronts? Is it the noise of oblivion rising from an empire of ruins? Or is it the trial of preservation, self-preservation, everyday life, adaptation, conflict mediation, the release of tension, the survival of the objects of our love, the nourishment of ourselves and all the others? Is it all of that and how it is against ourselves? Is it to burst, to ruin,

²³ I feel a need to smash myself, to burst, to not always think in a continuity with my own history. Maybe that's because I have no history, perhaps because everything I see as being my history appears otherwise to me, like a suit of clothes put on my back that I can't get off of me... And so then I start to think about the act of smashing myself, bursting, fragmenting myself, about searching for myself within our collective research, our possibilities, our collective utopias, meaning that I can't break with

my resignation and subordination if I don't break with the enemies that I've unmasked, if I don't recognise my rage, and if I don't make it explode with my violence against the ideology and apparatus of violence that oppresses me... If I don't find in other women as well my desire to get out, to attack, to destroy... To destroy, to take down all the walls and all the barriers...' I. Faré, F. Spirito, *Mara and The Others*, as quoted in *Sonogram of a Potentiality*, Brooklyn: Pétroleuse Press, 2011, pp.101-102.

to disrupt our continuity with history?²³ Is it to never have history again? Is it the enclosing of tears? Is the trial of our materials the materials of feminised affects, the vilified, vain, insubordinate, wasteful, unreasonable, scolding, witchy, and whorish?²⁴ Is the trial of the materials of revolutionary affects, the vilified, vain, insubordinate, wasteful, unreasonable, scolding, witchy, and whorish? Is it the cage of identity and accident of birth? Is the trial to be submerged in the river several times then imprisoned for life?²⁵ Is it trial by microanalysis? Is it trial by macroeconomics? Is it

a trial by macroaffects? Is the trial of today questions for mutual location? Is it interrogative life amid the tentacles and branches of the world? Is it systemic geneologies and a picture of the present?²⁶ Is it 'what time is it'? Is it 'what time is it in London'?²⁷ Is it 'what time is it in Berlin'? Is it 'what time is it in Skopje'? Is it 'what time is it Novi Sad'? Is it 'what time is it in Zagreb'? Does it long for a new body, a new city, a new time, does it long for

²⁴ 'Women were accused of being unreasonable, vain, wild, wasteful. Especially blamed was the female tongue.' Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

²⁵ 'Meanwhile, new laws and new forms of torture were introduced to control women's behavior in and out of the home, confirming that the literary denigration of women expressed a precise political project aiming to strip them of any autonomy and social power. In Europe in the Age of Reason, the women accused of being scolds were muzzled like dogs and paraded in the streets; prostitutes were whipped, or caged and subjected to fake drownings.' *Ibid.*

²⁶ 'Anne keeps giving us these questions for mutual location. Interrogative life amid the tentacles & branches of The World. Its systemic geneologies (our lives) & a picture of the present. What time is it at the Poetry Foundation? What's the light like in Beijing? Are you having a meltdown on Twitter this morning? Is your undoing like a necessary strike against the pernicious tranquility & lies?

If you don't give a fuck is your nihilism hot? What hoard of privation is behind you?' Dana Ward, 'Floyd & Uyen Against the World', <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/02/fl...>

²⁷ 'The text opens, What time is it in Sydney? What time is it in Tallahassee? What time is it in Cincinnati? What time is it in Helsinki? What time is it in Philly? and continues in this form many more times, asking what the time is in many places, and, finally, what kind of time it is ("is it a good time? is it a bad time?"). Reading through the list, the nature of the question itself becomes problematic. As we read the static text of a poem, it becomes obvious that the question, if read literally, can never be answered – or it always can, but never fully, never finally. As the places connote geographical immovability and immutability, the question "what time is it?" becomes all the more suggestive and open-ended. Time ... for what? one might ask.' Brandon Brown, 'What Time Is It?' <http://openspace.sfmoma.org/2013/12/what-time-is-it/>

any new terrain of possibility from which to newly move? Is the trial this semiogeography of interrogation? Must it be a landscape that ends in inflection? Or, must it take what is flat and bend it upward, must reach again and again outside the plane of the mere? Must it aspire, with its upturned ending, to move out of the plane of all leveled things? And is the trial of today the trial of the long, immense, deliberate disorder of all the sensitivities?²⁸ Is it trial by 3d printer? Is it by the long, immense, deliberate disorder

of the Bitcoin market? When it tries to organise, does its wayward force explode?²⁹ Does it carve an eternal heaven on a stage? How about the panel table? How about the lectern? How about the prison wall? How about the kitchen counter? How about the hotel bed? Does it make the bitterest enemies partake of a secret desire that will blow up countries? Does it promise so much that the promises it keeps will be a source of wonder and dismay?³⁰ Does it prepare in a dark window by watching the men named after days pass, memorising their

faces, each locked arm in arm?³¹ Does it watch the women do this too? Is it the law? Is it the law's slippery other? Does it exist by anxious categorisation? Does it transform the social order? Does it manage social excess? Does it mistake self-presentation as aim?

²⁸ 'The poet should make himself a seer by a long, immense, deliberate disorder of all the senses.' Arthur Rimbaud, 'Letter To Paul Demyen', Charleville, 15 May 1871.

²⁹ 'When I try to organise – my little Force explodes – and leaves me bare and charred –' Emily Dickinson, 'Letter to Thomas Higginson', August 1862.

³⁰ 'One night, on a stage, he will, by himself, carve up the eternal heaven, that Peau de lours. He will promise so much that any promises he keeps will be a source of wonder and dismay. In answer to the claims of an entire people he will give a partial and ludicrous vote. He will make

the bitterest enemies partake of a secret desire which will blow up the countries. And in this he will succeed simply by allowing himself to be moved by the immense word which dissolves into pity and revolves in hate. Incapable of failure, he will play on the velvet of all failures.' André Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 1924.

³¹ 'Stationed in some obscure window [Blanqui] would memorise faces while his cohorts marched by with a secret sign to mark them, such as wearing their coats buttoned on the left or walking arm in arm.' Priscilla Robertson, *The Revolutions of 1848: A Social History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

Is it a trial of lyrical enthusiasm? Is it the algebraic equation that makes the world intelligible?³² And what of this world do we want to be intelligible? And of what use is intelligibility in the disaster we can't contemplate?³³ Is the trial of who would be a poet

today? For in what other day can we issue forth no answers, but only a set of questions? And by which rhythm can the questions ensue? Should they charm, or bore, or test, or enrage, or captivate? Should they aggress with their own insistence and against custom and with the repeating that is a question we can ask with our bodies?³⁴ Is the trial of the poet that is today an arena in which we perform only in fidelity to the tradition of what is unanswerable?³⁵ And how in this shall we in the arena of today make the new arenas, who must always stare in the eyes of the police?

³² 'More and more the word promises to be an algebraic equation that makes the world intelligible. Just as the new Cartesian algebra permitted the construction of theoretical physics, so too an original handling of the word can make possible at any moment a new (theoretical and heedless) science that poetry could already give an approximate notion of. Then the time will come again when the study of the word will condition the study of nature.' Aimé Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge' in Michael Richardson (Ed.), *Refusal of the Shadow*, (Trans. Krzysztof Fijalkowski & Michael Richardson), London: Verso, 1996.

³³ 'the spiritual disaster I can't contemplate / is that I agreed to read (for 700 dollars) / at the Poetry Foundation', [name redacted], Gchat transcript, April 7, 2013.

³⁴ 'repeating is a question we can / ask with our bodies and what is / a tooth coccyx is / the beak of an ancient / dove below the sacrum the tip of / the sacrum places in the person a / sensation of slow form repeating it / doesn't require its own skin

to repeat / fox a foxtail a lizard as psaos / a small flask of modern oil at the throat / the repeat carries between bodies / what's made in this space are theories'. Lisa Robertson, 'On Form', pp.89-92 in this volume.

³⁵ 'I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.' John Keats, 'Letter to George and Thomas Keats', December, 1817.

Note

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Preliminary conversations

I've been thinking about some common interests, like the construction of the self through language and the means of communication. And we have this special task to do something performative. Maybe we have to circle more around some issues in order to come closer to a set of questions that we can then transform into a performative moment. But would this be something we would do all together? Or as a presentation and then a conversation around it? There will be a kind of preparation in the sense that we are now talking about these issues, but we won't give the results of our thoughts, although we might already know what we want. We look at some questions and we want people to enact them. And we have a card up our sleeves, we might have a trick. We will inevitably have more awareness of where we want to go than the others. Or maybe, slowly, by what we are doing, we can make sense together about what's going on. We can use ourselves as a kind of material that they could look at. Yes, we should look precisely at who is involved in the situation, who has which role; the division of labour, somehow, because it is not a simple performer/audience situation, but it is also not equal. And there is also the expectation to involve the other participants. The question I'd really like to follow is how the self is constructed or determined. Especially if there is already this kind of tension of who we are, the roles, the expectations. Yes, and what one can do within certain patterns, or how to subvert them, or to overfulfill something. Maybe we find ways of using estrangement techniques – which may not be a contemporary term, but perhaps relates to forms of determination that contemporary capitalism has implemented, and how to denaturalise them in that context, fuck them up, look at them from a different perspective. I find it appealing to have to confront these issues where the situation deals with them, but not in a cosy way, rather to embody some of the issues, there is a tension, you feel the crisis in

itself, the realisation of some of these issues becomes an experience, that might be a frustration, a feeling of impotence, because it is not just coming from a discursively resolved position. And where is the crisis in our conversations? The moment we talk to each other, in the language we use, in the way we speak *about* crisis? I read the text you sent, Brassier's text on improvisation. It was quite dense and difficult to understand, but interesting in relation to rules and behaviour. What inspires me in Ray's thinking is that he is very objective on the one hand – I mean as objective as one can be – and on the other hand there is lack of resignation that I find extremely appealing. It is like: ok, let's do something with the resources we have. It's interesting that somehow it is the opposite of the whole thesis of communisation, because it is about bringing in a programme, what would be needed in order to change conditions, what type of programme? He's getting back to questions that have been totally dismissed for many years, probably for good reasons, but perhaps, with the resources that we have today – what would it require to change today's conditions? What some people might find problematic is, when it comes into an analogy to today's reality in practice. But for him thinking is itself a practice that can lead to a form of idealism. He could be described as an idealist in some ways, because he still gives reason a chance or he believes in the power of reason. It was difficult for me to understand what he says about becoming an agent but not having control about it: on the one hand to get rid of oneself, but on the other hand thinking of a set of mechanisms that would enable this process of de-subjectivation. Like having a task that one can't fulfill actively. I guess it would be the mechanism itself fulfilling what is driving us and that is what becomes the subject, because it gains autonomy through self-determination. It's the act becoming the subject and having an agency that is cutting the relationship between self and agency. What I think is very realistic is to not imply agency in relationship to the self but rather that it is this act that has been generated. Let me see, if I find it in the text: 'the involution that grounds recognition is a purely mechanical reflexivity'. I can understand something about it, but he also says himself it is paradoxical. To create a situation where agency is possible, but you can't deliberately create it,

because this would then be something you would *do*, or what the self would do. Do you understand what my problem is? 'Involution', the way I understand it, is a kind of undoing of certain assumptions that you have had before, so let's say a behavior that is culturally and socially produced and nevertheless you are falling into certain ideological trajectories or positions. What this would mean is to gain consciousness about the way you've been interpellated ideologically or socially and culturally determined, and what it would require to gain your own determinancy or autonomy? Of course there is a problem with talking, because that would imply that I, individually, could do that. But it would rather be this act starting from a recognition of how you are culturally, socially and also biologically determined and then to gain access – to gain awareness – about those processes and then to understand what it would require to counter them, or to do what you need to do in order to be really self-determined. It would be an involution of those parameters that usually determine you. How does that thinking inform your performance practice? I am trying to incorporate it very slowly, sometimes and some ways are more rudimentary than others. I guess I am playing around with the notion of the subject, and this can even be very literal. Who is the subject in the moment of speaking, where is the tension? I am trying to find different forms of displacement that can be temporal or through instructions to other people. I am also trying to objectify myself through expressing insecurities that I have about myself or the way I portray myself or trying to look at these moments of mediation that are often taken for granted or as neutral. I also started doing this thing, when someone asks me for a bio, I take the lyrics of songs that try to embrace self-expression or empowerment of the self. These are just little gestures that I am trying to do in order to play around with some of these notions. So it's trying to understand both how I am objectified by the conditions or the expectations that some people might have when I am going to do something. And, in doing this, I am playing around with what is almost the opposite to what a singer-songwriter is doing, that is trying to express their emotions as much as possible. It is rather about trying to find a kind of twist or distance or progression. I can relate to this. Also because this expression of emptiness

and de-subjectification, and what you said, of being no-one and nowhere, it relates to the situation of being on stage. In a performance, when I speak to the public either towards a camera or in a live situation, it is not really clear who is speaking, although it is obviously 'the artist' speaking. It seems as if one's presence turns a piece into a piece about oneself, but on the other hand, for the audience there is not really anything to see of one's self, nothing's revealed. Something like this. It was interesting to look at your text in 'Return to Inquiry', referring to Foucault and the technologies of the self. I could see parallels in your way of using language and of trying to find out more about certain mechanisms. I'm still trying to do the circular understanding of how your practice is working, which in itself seems also quite circular. It's difficult to say where it starts, the writing, the work. The video with the diagram comes with a text on the act of correspondence and now turns into a performance. And the text in 'Return to Inquiry' goes back to research and writing on confession as a particular way of talking about oneself. The term is so much a signifier for authentic speech, of catharsis and the idea of a real self. At the same time, the act itself is a cultural technique, like confession in church, where people learned to talk about themselves, at first using formulas, but also learning this form of expression, and nowadays this is how they talk in psychoanalysis. So confessing as a technique may describe a similar effect as the experience of de-subjectification on stage. How do you think we can go forward? Maybe trying to find the links in the set of interests we have and which ones we feel strongest about and then see how we can put them into an experiment. Finding a strategy to do an experiment within the workshop. I am bit tired of improvising. I need something more rigid like a gear or a rule. Something which could help us in concrete ways to find out where we want to go and to find a strategy to go there. I would rather be minimally ambitious than be abstract all over the place. I agree, we should not leave everything open. I think what makes me struggle is this mixed-up situation of performance, presentation, workshop. When I think of making people *do* something... What can it be that we really do together there, if it is not just talking about a text? It kind of appeals to me this inbetween. We have to find a strategy that

pushes, almost like an act, that people become acts that show how things are functioning. Finding a strategy that is quite mechanical, but in a sense will be self-generating and it will take us somewhere, where we are trying to aim for. The act acting on itself. That would be amazing. Maybe we can use that as a title. Yes, that's a good title. In fact it relates, when I think about your diagram video, there is something very circular. I like the diagram, the idea of working with the diagram, working completely on paper. I am thinking of how to extract from the participants and from ourselves ways in which we embody a process of individualisation through language in the way we talked: how do we embody both the production of the self and, even if this is too much, the crisis of capitalism in language? And with that material almost doing an inversion of the act. Almost instead of trying to gain autonomy or freedom, trying to generate the material that would allow us to recognise how we generate a production of the self through language while at the same time we might embody the crisis in capitalism. How can we start generating an act that is not individually produced but includes all the different opinions? And maybe the subject is not an individual, but is an outcome of the diagram itself. Once there is this material we would need to find a strategy to put this material in motion – but not from the perspective of the self and the individuals, but rather as material triggered by the situation. That would be the act acting on itself. I don't have an idea of what it will require, so I am not very concrete. But it seems quite important to get this material from everybody in the sense of how we produce ourselves through language as individuals by necessity or how we need to market ourselves. What do you mean? In this situation, when we are among friends, this won't be the programme, but in other situations that are job-related it might be the case. What type of action do we need to do for someone in order to generate a possibility to do more work? While we are speaking I am trying to visualise it and think of the diagram. For example: using a camera for me has been important sometimes to create a particular tension, a kind of potential viewer, who is producing an expectation, almost like a control machine. Just want to mention it since we're talking about what we can actually do in the space, where we can sit or

stand or where the paper is placed in order to formalise the situation, to create a tension for everyone. The question is, how can we make ourselves and others say things in this very moment, how can we trigger a speech in this moment without anyone being prepared? What I like about the diagrams is that we can create a form of externalisation in which everything becomes quite objective, kind of clear. So it is not like referring to something someone said before. It is rather quite concretely in the diagram and not in the person anymore, it is written down, a sentence that people know is going to be written down. Once it is written down and everybody can see it, that will be very helpful, especially if there are certain similarities and differences that can be identified. It is like extracting. And yet I wonder what people will say. Do we have a conversation? About something, about a topic and how much does it matter what people say, or is it more about the act of constantly writing it down? We can ask people to try to think of ways in which they think, and to give examples of how they embody the production of the self through language? Also, how do they think they embody the crisis of capitalism in language? Their responses is what will be written. It is material that even if it comes from personal experiences, here it is written down. It is material from them. How to put it in motion – I don't have a clear strategy. It can be a process of externalisation. Who would write it down? The people themselves or someone else for them? It is not about using the diagram to explain something yourself, but rather that someone else does that for you. Maybe we can have some coordinates on the paper, in the way the paper will be spatially divided and what the terms are. Let's say it is like a map, where people can place it and then the next statement will be placed on the paper in relationship to both what has been said before and the coordinates. We will not only have the text, but a kind of map, connecting things and later on as an aid to navigation. I wonder how it can be formalised, so that it becomes a strong frame, that it is not like sitting around a table and scribbling down notes about how we are feeling, that instead it is more of a grid that you can feel, something that's determining the speaker or stressing you out. I guess it is also our role to create this atmosphere or frame. We can think of atmospheres that we want and the ones we don't want.

It makes a difference and is part of the game: in what kind of situation do we place people? Because what they say will have an impact, they say it and we take it and write it down and it will have an effect on the whole thing. What you say becomes a message – so be careful what you say! I wonder whether we have to announce everything beforehand, outside the frame of intentionality or the frame where everything matters. Or through starting the process everything can be developed. We have only a few precise sentences about what would happen that temporarily would trigger a process. The cards up our sleeves. Exactly, we have our cards that we can then slowly deliver. First we have the material and everyone has to see how this develops. For example, you start the conversation, while I am writing something down. So what people say has an impact and slowly this second activity becomes stronger. What's the impact? What someone says will be written down, so what one person says has a direct impact on the drawing that one cannot really control. Just following up on your idea of externalising. People start to think where they want to place their ideas and then it becomes more and more about the diagram and not about the conversation. I like the contrast of conversation and writing it down, which would make it more formal, and will realise the process. We can think of how to generate the template. There is another thing about diagrams. A diagram is supposed to show how you want to explain something: you have an idea in your head and you try to visualise it through the diagram. But then the image may become stronger. The fact that you have to organise the notions visually makes a difference, e.g. placing a term on the one side and another term on the opposite side of the paper only because it's appealing to see them parallel. As if the drawing and the visualisation also shapes what you want to say. Because it is this self-generating process of the diagram in a way. That's interesting. We can find ways in which we become aware of how the self-generating process of the diagram works, we can understand and visualise it and gain some agency in that process. So these are our questions: How does language embody the production of the self? How do you think you embody the crisis of capitalism? Yes, these are some of the issues that we want to explore. I remember you were suggesting to be more formal from the beginning.

That sounds more appealing, because it has more of a contrast between informality and structure, being more rigid. So we pose the questions and people may be self-conscious and we take notes, draw the diagram. It is more the act that is being generated, so I like that contrast, that it starts as a normal conversation and then it becomes more strange. But one could still start with these questions, right? I was also thinking, this gesture of taking notes as externalising something, that is both taking what people say very seriously, paying attention and at the same time using it and applying it to a system, or building up a system with it, taking it away. I was wondering, if there could be a moment when the diagram becomes speech again. When one suddenly starts to talk about something in the diagram, like feeding it back. And then it becomes absurd, or awkward, or alienated. Yes, it would be interesting, if we could manage to have this as a process of de-personalisation, in the sense of people objectifying their own thoughts. People can relate to themselves in the third person perspective through the material we generate. One point is whether we will be the only ones making the diagram. Ok, we have one session with this conversation, taking notes and using them to create a diagram, but then what would be the next step, what would we do with the material, talk about it? I had one thought, it is a little different, but maybe it helps. What I like about taking notes is this moment of interrupting the flow of speech. Especially when I think of these people, who are used to talking eloquently about theoretical issues. So that this could be a way of formalising or interrupting their flow of words. We can also talk about this, how the destruction (of discourse) is taking place. Then we are more precise in what we are looking for. We can use the first session to see how these two questions will be exercised and take extracts, because maybe the questions are quite abstract. During the first session we can see what happens outside of being self-conscious. Do you have an example, can you think of something? Those moments of people exercising their critical and discursive affinities. When you mention these questions, you said it could also be about personal experiences. It's an interesting ambivalence. We start with rather abstract questions, the discursive knowledge they imply, but then ask about personal experiences and then take what is said into the diagram as well.

A diagram always has something formalised about it, explaining a theory, and then these rather personal notions come in. So we should think of two sessions, a first part and a second part? Yes, maybe that's good. Because it seems that first the diagram is produced, and then we have to work out how to do something with this material. There would be a distance and the externalisation becomes more clearly defined, more formal. Or the structure that we have set up, however simple it is, it kind of starts functioning. I guess that will be the act acting on itself. How can we create this difference that you mentioned, between the diagram and the people? It would be good if somehow we could generate a second step, or a structure or a device. Whatever comes from the diagram, we would then know how to go forward, we will set it up in a way that it triggers this second stage. So what are our tasks now? We have to be more precise with the questions or having some guidelines in our heads. Second, who writes what at which point? Do we start to write and then give it over to the others? And the third task is to define the second part. Let's see, if the second task replies to the first question. Let's try to keep it simple for the time being. The second task: what I find appealing is to visualise the first session, to identify what people say, but then also how people say it. The conscious part, but also how to be able to look more for the unconscious part, which the person is not reflecting upon, but maybe we can try to identify. It may be difficult, but we can discuss it. We can look at the situations more precisely and see, what we might define as an embodiment of these two questions. There is this externalisation going on, that is, one person taking notes – as well as an unconscious way of embodying this question. This could also be a category for the map, for structuring the notes: the unconscious moment. Then it would be good to discuss whether people think about this, because we might be projecting. This is tricky. I think it is important to reflect it. It shouldn't be the atmosphere of a group therapy session, where people hear from us how they behave in a psychological way, but that we think of how to reveal some structures that shape our language or behaviour. Totally, in the second part this could become more obvious that it is not about personalities or how we are feeling, but trying to identify certain structures.

For the second stage it is no longer so important that it comes from an individual. It is not so personal, but things become more material for everybody to see. Maybe we can draw connections between each other, develop a structure. Maybe each personal opinion or behaviour connects to someone else. How can we find a very simple frame in order not to become too complicated or blurry, with all the words on the paper? How can we, not incorporate, but at least be conscious about or think of our bodies and how we move in the space and maybe through a change or displacement? Depending on how we set it up, people will feel more or less comfortable. And in the first part, where we extract things from what they say, people may be more comfortable and in the second part there is a change, when this formality becomes a bit more enforced. I don't know, if there will be a moment in which the diagram will dictate. Finding some sort of choreography so that it becomes clearer. Less easy, less comfortable. It is difficult to think of what will come next, without knowing what people will say. Because what people say will inform the next step. But maybe one can also think of the question again – embodying the production of the self – what would it mean for this situation? I could try to answer, on my side I am interested in ongoing changes that put an emphasis on how one portrays oneself, either to differentiate or validate or market: how one is trying to self-value oneself. Because artists often have to talk about their work or what they do and it is about integrity and believing in what you do in order to be able to get some other opportunities. Could this be one possible start of the session, that we start to answer these questions? So when you say something, I take notes and when I say something, you take notes. And then we extend it to the others and build up these categories. That sounds good, maybe people will realise then that this is what we do. We can do a circle, we do a round. We need a list, core categories that are kind of relevant. It is also a question, how this role of talking and taking notes, what does it mean? We will be kind of role models, we can establish something and people will, if not copy then at least have to relate to it. Maybe they come up with something else, like new categories. I like the idea that everyone can see it at every time. And once again this is formalising and the structure becomes more present.

And it will force people to be attentive spectators. Or how would you call it? Listeners. And how could this continue, when we have these rounds? The diagram can then feedback very strongly and it could dictate what we will do in the second stage. Maybe one could think that first the paper with the diagram is on the wall and then in a second step we put it on the table and we don't take any more notes, but we then have to use only notions that are already on the list in our speech. When we put the paper on the table and we are not allowed to add anything, but only to use what's there for our conversation. But I don't know, if this is too abstract as a task. That would be quite an easy way forward. I think people will love to talk about anything. Maybe what we need to do is the next time we talk we can pose these questions to each other and think about the diagram and we need some categories that we know will trigger something. If we have material, as you said, it will allow us to see what to do with it. One could think of a strategy: what one person says indirectly draws a rule for what people are allowed to say. For example, in the second part we are not allowed to do things that people explained in the first part. To put it simply: if someone had been stressed by the expectation to follow the theoretical discourse, then in the next step we would try to avoid the discursive mode. Almost like a negative. What would it be to do the opposite of what is being said. And when things are not allowed, we can even be the police! And the first session is the individual and the second one is already a small collective. And people wouldn't know that this is going to happen. The first one is easy, in the sense of the production of the self, but then what could be the expression of the collective and how to embody that. One more thing. I am not sure, if it is so clever to ask the others to do both talking and taking notes. Maybe it should be only us making the diagram, in a way the two of us are these performing people, even if this is not a performance, but we have a certain role and we hold something back. People don't really know if we are playing or not. Maybe through talking and being there we will have some categories and know how to navigate, even when we are open to what everybody is saying. We already have some categories from these conversations. Last time you spontaneously started to answer

the question and said you were interested in how one portrays oneself either to differentiate or validate, because artists often have to talk about their work. I think this question of value and how to create it is one point. And then I was thinking about surplus value, which is often discussed when you do something together or as a group, that is who gets more out of that, who gains extra profit. So this could be some of the categories. And then I like these words: inversion and involution. Involution comes from Brassier's text, which is a difficult term to imagine. And inversion we used earlier. These could be terms to kind of classify some of the speech acts. Ok, I get it, as terms in order to differentiate and categorise... And then the very activity of making the diagram or the act of externalising is also an expression or embodiment of a contemporary way of talking, like channeling something into keywords and into a diagram. It has this managerial atmosphere, which makes me think of your text 'Managerial Authorship'. I am not really familiar with techniques from coaching, as in, attempts to gain knowledge as simply as possible. Do you know anything about this? I always try to pay attention, when I come across these things, but I don't really know about any coaching methods. But also in the art world it became almost a fashion to use diagrams. Though, of course, it doesn't always mean the same, one has to distinguish. How can we have an awareness of this that would take into account the contemporaneity of diagrams and the need for them. It's interesting, on the one hand you see the need for selling oneself and on the other hand you see the need for working together and collaboration. So on the one hand the necessity of the production of the self in the mode of fragmentation or individuation and on the other hand there is a need of maximising and working together. It's an interesting tension. There is also this problem that you refer to in the 'Managerial Authorship' text, that is: collaboration or self-organised work institutionalises itself and is then in the same situation it wanted to escape from. But how can this be present? Maybe we can just keep it in mind. Ok. We don't know yet, if this will all work anyway. But when the two of us do the diagram, we don't want to create an atmosphere of helping people to express themselves, rather we take something from them and translate it into the diagram.

There is already a moment of alienation in this kind of an approach of rationalising things, or putting them in the logic of the diagram, working as a kind of counter-movement to just being together and talking informally and being a group. I agree. So do we try to rehearse? It is kind of difficult, so it is good when one of us will start. Yes, you start. I make the diagram... ok. The question will be: How do we embody the production of the self in language? I am just going to start talking. It was maybe more difficult to think about it in relationship to language. I certainly know the things I do that perhaps are quite specific to me as an artist, even though they might be very collaborative, but at the same time this has different forms. Also I have a set of interests, so through that I can see how I differentiate myself from others or how I build myself a persona in relation to my artistic practice. It is very obvious to individualise oneself in the sense of having a career and working in a specific way. So even if this is not only language, there is a language around it in talking in specific ways about what I am doing. I probably try to think about myself in order to differentiate the work I do from that of others and I think this is quite present. Through the writing that I have done I produce myself as a different kind of improviser. Therefore I try to have an opinion which is different from others and in that I am quite alone in the sense that people want to improvise – ‘let’s play together’ – and now this doesn’t happen to me, and I also don’t do it so often. Ok, I have already a lot of words on my paper. Once I started, I could keep going. That was scary at the beginning, but better at the end. But in the space you would see what I am writing. Here, look, maybe you can see the drawing. This is your first sentence and you spoke very slowly, so I notated each word in a long line. And by doing the diagram, did you have many doubts? Or could you be quite mechanistic? One has to be very fast in reacting and writing. And it is a difference, if I do it for one person and it becomes a map of this person or if I put all the different statements into one, because one has to be more reduced. I think it’s so great, sorry, to interrupt with my enthusiasm! How amazing it will become once it’s different people creating this mechanism, when it’s not only the individual but a collective constellation. Well, it’s your turn. Ok, I’ll try.

I am not sure what it means in the question, to embody... in language, does it mean in my language, when I speak? I thought of keywords, the necessity of finding keywords for yourself which would make you recognisable and memorable. I often find myself thinking of keywords explaining what I do and what I am interested in – and this ‘being interested in’ is already such a specific term that we use or that we are asked to use – but then I am often trying to say the opposite at the same time. I sometimes ask myself, if my individual practice is detached from what I do in the more collaborative work. And I wonder, if people know where I am standing or how they can locate me. And I don’t know, if I am unable to make this clear or if I am deliberately choosing this role, I stop here. It was really interesting to see that once you start you have to just go forward, it is not as scary as I thought. Was it difficult for you? It was ok. I only thought, I could probably also say other things. One makes a decision to say something, but it could be something else. So do I say what’s important to me or what could be interesting for others, did I choose the right thing to say? But on the other hand you don’t choose, it is part of the process that you just start talking. But when we do it in the space, everything that happens will come in, people will see what others talked about and will relate to the categories. So the last person is in a different situation than the first one. I guess also the understanding of the title, the process itself is implicit. The more we are able to have an overview or understanding of what is neutral, and what is producing something specific, it is embodying perhaps some of the questions. So for example when thinking of how you externalise, you also have to think of what to externalise and how to perceive. So let’s acknowledge this and then see how to give it more visibility in relationship to what is a diagram, like contemporary forms of labour. But what do we do with our task to also acknowledge how people speak? Maybe we can agree among us on a hidden grid that has coordinates in relation to how something is said. Speed, confidence, relaxation, e.g. talking more confidently is written on the left and more insecure modes of speaking are written on the right. We had this idea to take the diagram down and place it on the table and talk about it, the idea of the diagram becoming a rule.

Maybe that's the inversion, the inversion of what people first expressed turning into a rule. So we look at the diagram. And then, how will we be able to talk to each other? This is interesting in regard to the question: what do you externalise and what do you not externalise? Maybe it will be an exercise in repression in the sense that we will need to think about how to talk without individualising ourselves. So this could be the exercise for a third part: what could be an embodiment of collectivity in language that disregards the self? I think when we have the diagram, it's a moment, where our title is coming back into play: The Act Acting on Itself. People are expressing and explaining something, it becomes externalised, a diagram that is the map for the next conversation. Everything we say comes out of the diagram, a rather collective moment of interpreting, taking the arguments of others. I think this is the exercise and creates a tension, and a reflection of how we stress something. Maybe through talking about the diagram, certain techniques come about and then it's easier. And what do the hidden categories change? The way people would talk? Because obviously this is not about optimising our way of speaking. Maybe this has to be revealed that we are all part of the act somehow, everyone is to a certain extent on the same page. So do we try to work on the question of how we embody the crisis in language? Maybe we could do the exercise again with the second question. Maybe by doing the exercise, we understand its relevance better. Before we do this... we said there would be some categories indicated on the paper, that is, the paper is not blank. So I tried something in order to understand what the problems might be. I made a kind of grid. On top I made a line with 'self, language, crisis, capitalism' and on the bottom 'collectivity, unconscious/body, embodied mechanisms, labour/career' and the notion of 'value'. Could this be a possible grid or would it be already too much? Because it is different from last time, when we just listened and made notes. Maybe that's a good idea with the categories and to see how it works. So by doing the diagram on your paper, we can find out how useful it is, if it is better to have this grid. Your concern is that some of the relations might disappear? I am not sure. My experience with diagrams is a rather paradoxical one. Visually you are building up something that makes sense

and on the other hand it constantly fails to make sense, getting absurd. If there's no grid or categories I imagine it would become very confusing. But when you have this grid, it is pre-determining. What we want from the grid is to have a rigid system that people have to refer to. Something collapses or comes together, i.e. the personal expression and the grid. But I don't know, if it really works when we have so many terms or if this is too obvious. Maybe we can choose three terms. Or four. Let's try to find terms from the field that you already have. Maybe it is interesting to include one rather emotional term, something like DESPERATION or ISOLATION or something existential – and not just the usual ones: crisis, capitalism, labour... SELF and COLLECTIVE would be good to have. Instinctively I put SELF to the top and COLLECTIVE to the bottom. And DESPERATION to the left? We can also use another term. INSECURITY. Yes, maybe this is more precise in this context, because it doesn't only refer to an emotional state or how you present yourself, but also an economical situation, precariousness. Ok, I put that on the left. And on the right, I don't know. I am thinking of why capitalism, even though it is in crisis, has an impact on everything, especially in relation to INSECURITY. What about VALUE? Ok, let's go with that. And what are our hidden categories that are observing the unconscious? I think the hidden grid is about the way we perceive a certain behaviour or how things are being expressed. Yes, it is a difficult category, but maybe it will not always be important. Shall we try? Even if it is only a couple of minutes. I have stage fright. So just so that we have the same question in mind: how do we embody crisis in language? Ok. I always thought it's rather difficult to understand oneself as someone with certain qualities or what it is that makes a personality. I always thought this would be seen as some kind of existential and individual problem, but then it is as well a more general symptom, that is, the need to define oneself more in individual and less in collective terms, to find some notions for oneself that seem specific. And it feels like a problem, if you don't have that. Ok! Well, I am not very good at drawing. I show it. Oh, this time the connection is very bad, so I can't see anything. You can only describe how it worked in the grid. It worked quite well, in the sense that for

example that 'difficult to understand certain qualities' and 'existential problem' obviously needed to go towards INSECURITY and the SELF, and the problem that comes from the psyche, like 'to define oneself', is going from COLLECTIVE to the SELF, maybe more towards INSECURITY, but at the same time a link to VALUE, because you need that in order to kind of be somebody. And now it's your turn. There seems to be a connection between both questions. Which may be good to combine them. Ok, I try my best. I am thinking of the individual... It just seems that in Spain, as I have been here in the last week, it would be more 'the' crisis, because the crisis is very, very obvious, but more general. There is an awareness that everything's fucked, like there is corruption, everything is falling apart and there is nothing that we can do about it. I guess it is very difficult to talk from a different perspective in relationship to crisis. Here it would be much more reflective, much more general, it is everywhere around and everyone is talking about it, on the streets. While in Sweden that is not the case, crisis will be – nobody wants to be associated with the term crisis. Because especially in Stockholm where people are conscious about their image, they don't want to be associated with something that negative. I am generalising. It's such a big difference in these two different places from a personal perspective. How to embody the crisis in language? Very simply it's a lack of confidence, or the lack of being able to say something very strongly, feeling insecure about what I am saying, kind of having doubts. I think the personal and insecurity are related. Do you want to stop? You don't have to continue. Yes. It's interesting the question of how you bring this personal question in and at the same time, while doing it, reflect that it is not only personal, but always connected to the general situation. And also the other way round, if you want to describe a more general or political situation, you realise that you cannot distinguish it from the particular situation you're in and the different conditions. There was obviously a lot happening in the INSECURITY section and the question of VALUE came in by comparing these two countries. How you described Spain, when everything's fucked up, it's the question of where is the value at all, whereas in Sweden it is rather the protection of value, not wanting to see the falling-apart.

I didn't really know, where the COLLECTIVE would come in as it was not in your description and it didn't become an option, but it was there in talking about the two different nations as collective moments, though not in the sense of a decision for collectivity. I wonder what it means to do this and produce different layers, i.e. the difference if I had used your paper and thus related to your notes on my former statement. Regarding the collective, it made me think about the difference between Sweden and Spain. In Sweden crisis relates more to existential and personal problems and here in Spain it is already a few years that it is present, and people socialise through the crisis. It is not a personal existential problem, it is part of the system, so to be depressed or to be down is the normal thing. So it's interesting, how in Sweden it becomes personal, but here you are in the atmosphere of a system in crisis. I try to think about Germany, as we talked about that earlier, which is probably similar to Sweden, though Germany has this special position in the financial crisis, and in how decisions are made for Greece and Spain. In a way one could think of being in a collective with other nations – I guess solidarity is another word – but then only protecting the finances of your own country is rather a gesture of de-collectivisation. I think it's an interesting tension. In order to make the collectivity of Germany stronger or to bring it more together, in order to generate a broader collectivity in the sense of a European solidarity, you would sacrifice a more complicated situation, or that might generate some antagonism between Germans themselves. It's that tension. I make a jump, back to our diagram. How did the four notions that made our grid have an impact on what you said? What was their effect? The COLLECTIVE was totally there, when I was talking, obviously because I was trying to think, how would I talk in relationship to the context that I am in right now, Spain. So basically it was easier to throw myself into that. To talk in such an insecure context is very natural. And it was kind of obvious to think of Sweden, related to the more personal, the SELF, the more personal way to be able to express oneself. How was it for you? I had something particular in mind that I wanted to say and while saying it, I realised how much it connects. But it didn't really change what I wanted to say, only that what I said kind of fell into place.

But I also stopped rather quickly, it would have been different, if I had continued. How easy it was to connect, it was kind of in the background. I had a similar feeling while I was talking that it fell into place, one coordinated with the other. So we are going well with this grid. It is also good to provide something to hold on. If someone gets carried away with their own thoughts, we can apply it to the grid, if someone gets lost, they can use the words as a trigger. What do you think of the second part? It has been interesting to talk about the diagram after drawing it, so I was wondering, if we should have this conversation with everyone after the first round and let the diagram dictate what we say. Maybe I see three parts. The diagram, the conversation and the exercise. This really relates to the question of the exercise, how to do a negative exercise. We should do this exercise in which we try to not embody the self or the crisis, that would be at least funny. An exercise in language, an experiment in language. The three stages seem very relevant. Yes, and I always imagined talking about the diagram as a first step away from oneself, because one relates to the visual script, it may function like a script for one's arguments. This second stage could be a good transition, it could be our common map. And this can then be transformed into an exercise. Maybe we should talk about the exercise more precisely to understand what we want. That sounds good. We will have three hours. We keep it simple, but we can work with the hours. There is some formality in the situation, but the time works with that. What would the exercise look like? What would it need as experiment in order not to embody the self in language? What would it require in order not to reproduce the self? That's a very difficult question – and exercise. Somehow, when I start thinking about it now, it is as if one has to stop thinking about individual necessities or individual concerns. Or the question that comes to my mind is: but who am I then. How to be collective but without speaking for another? And what does it mean to think of this in language, does it have an effect on grammar, on the words I use? How do you express yourself within that context that is somehow a game? It will be again the notion of self-expression, but at least it will question it. It will be an expression of that obviously. Do you find it easier to think of this question when you think of music?

Would you find it easier to think of an exercise, if we would do music together? I am trying to think about that. It's an interesting question. There is a notion of individual freedom that is closely related to both of our questions. The emphasis on the self, but at the same time its crisis? Maybe in improvisation I can find ways in which it is problematic and trying to find ways in which something could be done. Ray and I did an exercise. The text was part of a concert that we did, so we tried to embody that text in music. We tried to look for an improvisation that would disregard the self, we were not there, we were not on the stage, well, he was on the stage but behind some tables and furniture that were covered with black cloth trying to generate weird alien shapes. Basically there were certain elements, and it was very on/off and there was huge industrial fan in the middle. Elements would come and go, but it was not visible, no person, it was quite mechanistic. So we were trying an improvisation that acts on itself, an improvisation without improvisers somehow. There was something quite funny about no one being on stage, people couldn't see anybody and the audience seemed confused about what was going on. Where were you? I was on the mixer, doing the sound in the back of the room. Ray was actually on the stage, but nobody could see him, because he was lying down on the floor and had access to the interrupting, to the switcher of the industrial fan. So maybe the interaction of the concert was trying to deal with some questions. The reason I asked you was because I am trying to connect this back to the beginning of our conversation. One concern in 'Return to Inquiry' was how one can withdraw from oneself even by talking about oneself. And this means both when you are literally giving an account of yourself, but also the moment of being on stage, and how this changes the perception and how you can or cannot hide or step away from yourself. And there are other traps. If a confession is a technique, it's not a confession. And perhaps this and your experimentation with the concert format is related to our exercise. That sounds good. This is another card up our sleeves. It will require some techniques. Last time we came up with those four notions for the grid. How to put it clearly: the question, the diagram, the hidden grid, the three parts. How do we feel about that? How to make it more concrete?

I was thinking about the situation in the last part and the exercise of trying a situation without production of the self, whatever that could mean. It would be interesting, if we just proposed this task to the people, without explaining too much. It would be good to start with the question. I try to put it simply: How do we embody in language the production of the self? Hopefully, through the way people talk and the diagram, we will be able to make the connections. Then we discuss the diagram. And then give the task, which is a clear task, nevertheless it might be difficult or awkward or strange. It will be quite simple: Try to speak in a way that does not reproduce the self. And the risk is that there is silence, a moment of reflection. There will be this clear task, perhaps difficult and slightly awkward. There will be a tension. Like a child trying to express oneself, but not being able to articulate or to use the material properly. Do you have concerns about the third part? It's not a concern. I am just trying to imagine it myself. I think the task formulated in this question kind of makes your mind collapse. It's really difficult to imagine what it could mean. But that's good and if the first two parts go well, it could be just interesting to see what happens. So if nothing happens, when people are bored or confused or tired, what can we do? What would people talk about, if they are not allowed to talk in a way that reproduces the self? I am very interested in the negative consequences, what could be considered as the negative consequences of the exercise. Like boredom, awkwardness – let's think of negative terms, the worst that could happen. Maybe I am wrong, but I imagine it would be a proper embodiment of inarticulation. Through the first two parts, even if we have a structure that is quite formal, it is still within the discursive realm. It will be people that are very good in talking in an analytical way and with certain analytical tools, it will be rolling. But the third part, it will be a difficult task, there are no tools to use, they have to be developed. Then we will see perhaps a more naked, if this is the right word, a more fragile or less assertive behaviour. Somehow this feels challenging, so we don't know yet, how it will go. So even if it produces long silences, what could be the worst scenario? I agree. This undefined part is so much embedded into the whole structure that it becomes something else.

It will be instinguishable, if for example the silence comes from those, who don't know what to say or because they are trying to fulfill the task by not saying anything. With this we are opening up a game, there is no coming back together, once again using the analytical tools. It will happen informally, outside of the framework. Ok, but the second part is still a little undefined. We talked about rules, that is, the diagram turning into a rule. People would not just elaborate on what they said before. It is not about adding something to the diagram, it is more what comes out of the diagram, what's the map of our conversation. It is task-like as well. Maybe we should try to be precise about how to frame it. Basically the diagram, as you said, falls back into ourselves. This process of, well, de-personalisation is too much to say, but about the connections and the structure – we can try to give an emphasis to the diagram, though we have to be careful. We are giving a certain authority to the diagram, but we are the ones who are using this authority. We talked about this before. On the one hand this gives us a sense of objectivity, on the other hand it has been filtered through our perspectives. Interesting to think about the question of danger. But is this exactly what it is about, the contradiction? I think this is part of the game, to also see that it is not objective at all. But we can propose to try to make it more objective, collectively. That it gets corrected. How could it be both, that it kind of gets corrected and objective and at the same time, maybe by doing this, it falls into ourselves. One could also think of what the diagram actually is. What does a diagram stand for, or even reproduce? A mechanism? We are not using any kind of machinic devices that are drawing or building up categories or patterns. It's handmade, self-made. What is the diagram in relation to, for example, capitalist structures or mechanisms? I guess we talked a bit about this before. How it is used as a strategy in managerial thinking, probably coaching and stuff like that, to link up things quickly or express relationships and concepts. Yes, but it is also more ambiguous. We kind of like that it is an expression of something and at the same time a moment of formalising and therefore not subjectifying it, showing the individual statement, and on the other hand the diagram is externalising this, triggering a process that runs by itself. And it becomes collectively understood. Maybe it can be a form of correction.

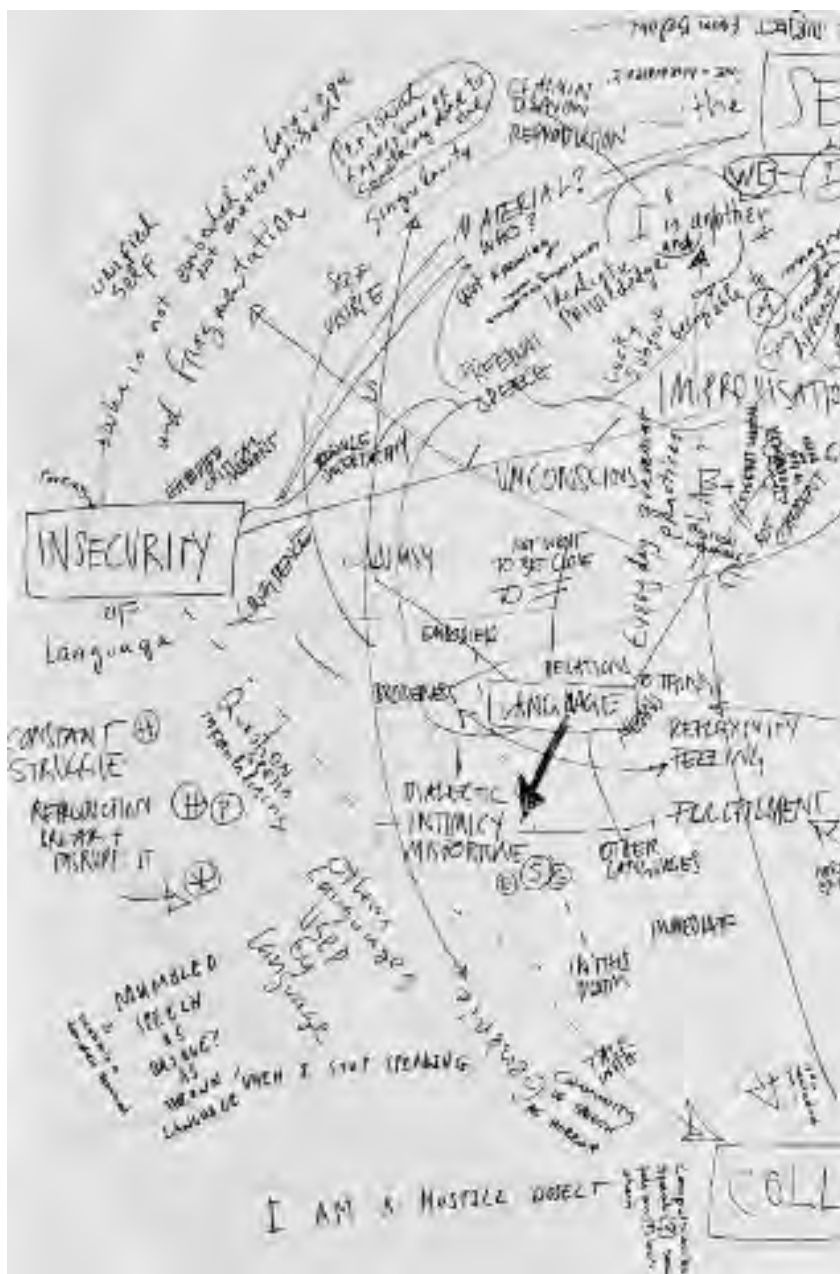
It is also a tool for measuring something and making it unmeasurable at the same time. What would be our ideal idea of the diagram? Do we use it as a positive or as a negative tool? You mentioned the positive aspects that are driving towards some clarity, so that we can all be on the same page, literally. The negative consequence is maybe this process of simplification or objectivation, which is obviously also used for capitalist strategies. This tension of today's condition, living under the commodity form, inevitably it is part of the knowledge economy. This tension will inevitably be there, but we are trying to understand how we are implicit, complicit within that. If we question the diagram as a technique, we are also questioning what we are doing. It may become too self-referential. I agree, we don't have to discuss these kind of things there. I just needed to think it through, because it is connected to the questions. So the idea is, as you said: How the diagram falls back into ourselves. I wonder, whether someone will stand up during the first part and totally disagree. I would be surprised.

Note

Preliminary conversations ahead of a performance presented at the *Anguish Language/Literature and Crisis* seminar at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, 1-4 October, 2013.

Sources

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John Cunningham

Tick Bird / Bird Tick

The phenomenon of zugunruhe was first identified and named by the German ornithologist Gustav Kramer in 1949. He had created a birdcage with a glass floor in which he placed migratory birds. Through the glass floor he watched the birds' increased agitation during times of migration. What he was witnessing was their need to go, their desire to migrate: zugunruhe.

– Rachel Berwick, from the artist's project *Zugunruhe*, *Cabinet Magazine*, Issue 43, 2011.

A chance encounter while still half asleep, just woken, slowly reading a magazine. Reading and thinking, lying in bed, drinking coffee, staring at the half light books, already restless discomposed.

Then out of the page this compound of German words: *zugunruhe*. *Zug*: to move, to go. *Unruhe*: anxiety, to be restless. Put together: *zugunruhe*. Suddenly I understand all of it, or at least retched meaning of the shivers, the too erect spine, the clenched face. Shock of that spiralling whatever that always pulls me up short, migratory insomnia, anxious movement, always moving in the same space, that is, inside.

I had always thought of myself as more of a tick than a bird. Silently waiting in the closed limits of my given environment in order to suddenly be activated by a fortuitous change in temperature or a sudden movement of flesh and body. The tick suits us inhabitants of the metropolis. Our behaviour changes with every passing gadget, arm or leg, or rather it doesn't so much as change as wait upon the right moment, when movement coincides with climate and mechanism and a speck of blood or sweat suddenly makes any gesture possible. Or not any gesture, since I thought that I – or we – are ticks and there are still limits even if these limits might sometimes be under the skin of another, whether that other be subject or object, bloody value or valued blood, something or nothing to inhabit and crawl within.

Still, I had always thought of myself as more of a tick, or at most a louse. This odd scientific term, *zugunruhe*, shakes this old conviction of mine, allows me to grasp the intersection of walls and these animal markings. Markings such as these suggest not so much the *tick*-like as the *bird*-like, consumed with emotional scratchings, anxious needs to move, to go. No talons to scratch at this glass cylinder, these transparent walls, just a restless fall, a repetitive movement, a motionless flailing. Nowhere to migrate to, but desire to go, follow stars, move without movement, but the migratory circuit, all of these markings, always lead back here. Odd composite migratory creature, unable to fly, desirous of flight, incessant movement, glazed eyes, straining neck. Not even the lines traced by lunatics, broken marks of identity, trembling hands, encapsulate a desire for flight as well as *zugunruhe*.

But there is still the tick awaiting activation by breath, word and deed, limbs perfectly still, eyes shut. Who's to say that the tick might not inhabit the bird and follow its movement? Or the *tick/bird* conjunction, giant body of a tick, head of a bird, talons and segmented legs, desire for flight perfectly embedded in the simple circuits of need. *Tick/bird, bird/tick*, a feathered timepiece with a clock made out of instinctual insect movements awaiting the time to flee, to bite. Or, more prosaically, tiny ticks might even pilot birds around the transparent walls of the cylinder, awaiting another opportunity to disappear beneath the skins of other animals and the surfaces of buildings, eliding detection, less driven by desire than need, always burrowing, no need for flight, just a motionless inactivity to be superseded by a chance combination of circumstance and the meaningless good fortune of a tick.

Zugunruhe, a particular temporality, not just encapsulated in these tangled words and images but in bus queues, supermarkets, the tiredness of a 15 minute coffee break, the point when words won't do, gestures and smiles that have little duration within the work day, all of the brokenness that dwells within and without, the fucked up speech of drunken office workers and homeless people, something encapsulated in the interstices of more standardised minutes.

This temporality of anxious movement and non-movement is what the smooth, circular motions of capitalised work and play can never quite encapsulate, something buried within the skin of that time that can emerge as a broken window, a drunken argument, an upsetting of familiar relations, saying ‘fuck off’ to the boss, inappropriate laughter at the death of a politician, scratching an internal itch rather than attending to the task at hand, preferring to waste something like time even as this wastage is itself imposed by what is still quaintly termed a *material* condition. Tick bird ticking.

Or it’s more likely none of these morning reflections upon the image, the temporality of this tick/bird mean anything much at all. Not a bird, a tick, or a tick/bird, just this body right here, these walls and streets, all of these technologies of consumption and production, the mirrored glass of offices and the exhausted murmurs of mobile phone conversations. No tick, bird, bird/tick or tick/bird just all of that and more, this tired, collective isolation, the decision to keep going and the decision to stop, in the face of the continued resistance of what simply is, the cyclical rhythms of waking up to a process of attrition maintained through the most banal means. Whether working or not working, going or stopping, censured time is all that seems to exist. Ticking moments of stop/go endlessly recycled until the timepiece breaks, explodes and a disjuncture forces its way through this spiral of inert minutes that push forward, are so carefully measured, then collapse back, a disjuncture that halts in the sudden unexpected movement of skittering insect legs and feathered wings, mandibles burrowing into the skin of everything that has been expected and infecting it with something new as *zugunruhe* unfolds.

Anguish Language
Berlin Group
Anxiety Reverberates

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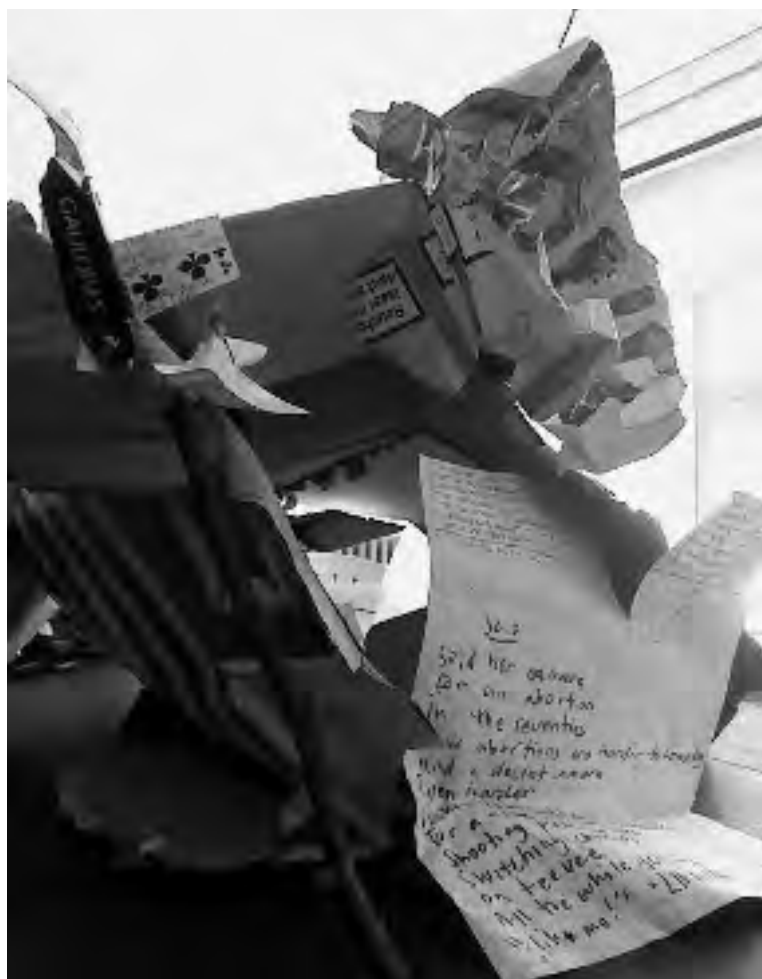


ANXIETY REVERBERATES, PASSES
 THROUGH, EMERGES OUT STRAINS
 TOWARDS RELEASE THROUGH NEURON
 FUNDING LET ACCOMPRESSED WITHIN
 THE BONES OF THE SPITTLE
 EXPERIENCE. FORMS GAIN PARTIALNESS
 A STATE OUTSIDE THE FLESH, IMPART OF THE
 FLEE BY THE ARCHITECT. A SPANISH
 CHRIST REDEEMED BY THE CURRENT ADAPTATION
 OF THE WORKS AND TIME IN LARGE DELEGATIONS
 OF THE WORKSPACE AND READY TO WORK THEIR
 DIFFICULTY RELIGIOUS MADE. THE LAST WINDS AND STREETS
 OUT BARE LINES OF WINDS PAGES AND HIND OF STREETS TO
 REPLY TO. EXTENDED BY THE STATE TO REPLY THE WINDS OF
 IMPERIAL BARS. THE WINDS AND ONE SIZES. Machines
 would it seem and parked to look together. The by
 would the getting down of on the. The garden is the street, which
 replied by the construction of a to prove garden around the
 corner of the passage. The corner up with an out
 side to street and the passage. The is the
 side of the passage. The side of the passage. The side of the passage.
 The will change the side of the passage and
 beyond the side of the passage in the passage.

Anxiety reverberates, passes through, empties out, strains towards release though never finding it encompassed within the bowels of this shitty experience. Paralysis could point towards a state outside the flesh imposed on the flesh by some architect. A spongiform Christ perforated by the fervent adoration of the worms who came in large delegations off the workbench and ready to work their highflown religious magic. Our guts splayed and stretched out doubled pulled out along miles and miles of streets to connect two entrances of the city to carpet the hooves of imperial horses as they march over our defeat. Machines pulled it apart and pushed it back together. 'One day', she said, 'the grinding down of our life, the grinders in the street, will be replaced by the revolutionary friction of power-sanders against the scrotums of the bourgeoisie'. She came up with an act acting on herself and disintegrated. And in the final dispossession of flesh and home, skin and bones she slid inbetween the grates of the sewer and rejoined her brethren in the soupy muck below. Anxiety and paralysis damage even Christ's guts, though I don't know what that means, machine of nations that disintegrate a mind, that dispossess himself when he is feeling determined by crisis. A disintegration of collective endeavours pointing out at an red empty circle.

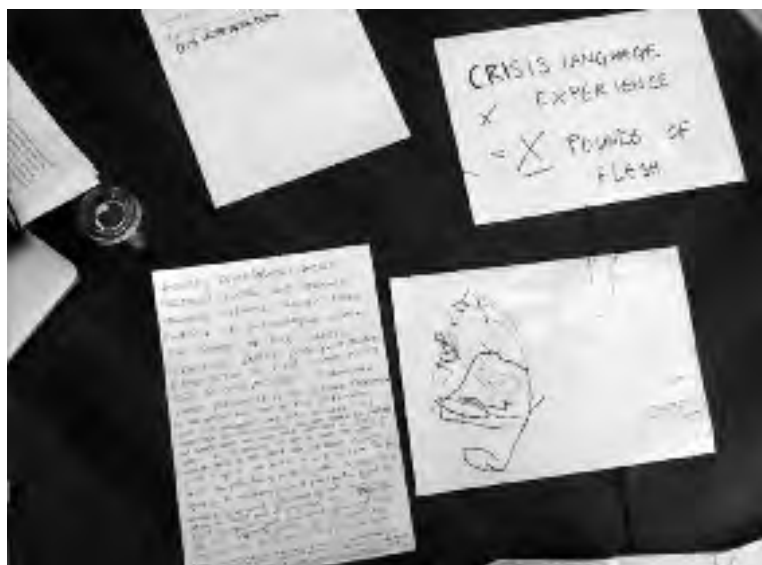
Note

The handwritten text overleaf was written according to the principles of 'exquisite corpse' game, each participant continuing the sentence from the previous one, with only slight knowledge of what had been written prior to their turn. The game was played at ZKU during the Anguish Language research seminar in Berlin, October 2013.









All images from the Anguish Language workshop at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, October, 2013.

Anne Boyer

Bambule

An earlier version of this poem had a different last line: *it's better to set fire to a reformatory than to build one*. The language of doors dominates the stanza, the unbustling hallway of any dawn without barricades, the queasy longshot of any event that evolves in no particular time or place except in whatever videographic representation of what can't be displayed in public, at least not for twenty years.

Let's agree on the facts. The reformatory is architecture as cognition. My tears cling to the databases past data's expiration. I was Germanic, sentient, teenage, a black and white image then. It was the vernacular inflected with vehicle. The name of this poem is code for 'a girlish docudrama of thought'.

It was like a rave – but with discourse. We were just trying to keep it blurry – they were just trying to deferment the masses. We were barely born, then we had to rush out the door to see what the fuss was about.

It was us!

Us, us as a lexicon! Us, us on the run! Getting the fuck out of there was our slander! It was us! We yell a lot so what just happened can happen again!

The whatever-isn't beckons. We will astonish the circumscription!
We want it all, that plus the bionic-going!

The next stanza is run-for-it as the lone historical agent that will negate it all.

It's so cool when everything is just a new world hanging from a window with your friends.

I suppose it remains kind of famous, but when they talked about us they talked about the weather. That's the true story of our faction's exceptional event. We were the agents of cartwheels, gymnastic, thrilled, rowdy, accompanied, bossy at the workout gear, ambulatory and well-suited for the hovels of athleticism. The whole world was made to end up in our diaries.

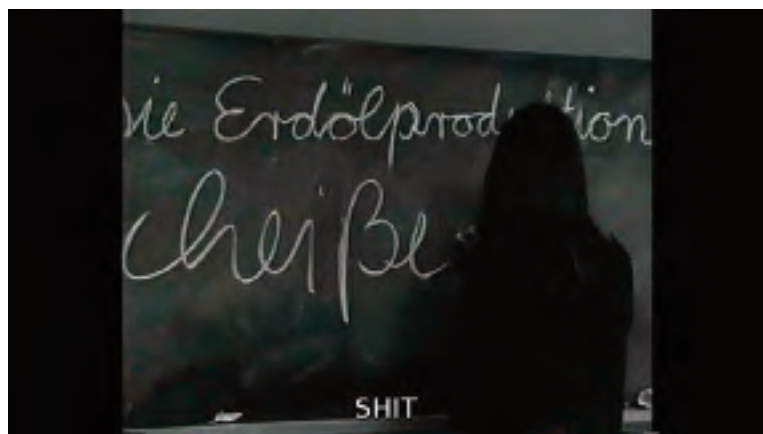
Later, the cards fell as they may. Fortuna held a rent-party. There we tested clubs, luck, sharpie tattoos, thin air, collared dress shirts, bad looks, radiators, gender, experiential impurity of bacchanals, witchling sabbats, the curtain calls of sentimental armies, popular ballets and the rhythmic self-help all-stirring.

No moment of animal pleasure was ever a fabrication, nor were all of yesterday's parties ever a bore. Ecology was always relevant, dancing along to the period's slow edits and TV drama's spatially restricted sets. Some even called it crystallised popular rebellion, but what could we know about that?

We were barely born, then we had to rush out the door to see what the fuss was about.

This time, just liminality, roaming the locker rooms of Babylon, me and my girls, wishing repression were at least Technicolor, having that conversation again, then again.

I'm spying on cognition in the corridor. I barely know what to do with the emptiness. That's a tactic of pathologists. Space is a lavish excuse for panning: the cart before the bench, the bench before the judge, the same thing as before only now my song is gone, in its place an architectural element of commando-style cutting and pasting, staccato and run-on lighting.



What the hallway is up to now is a stroll towards a casual insurgency. *What's going on? Hey what's up?* We didn't talk about the weather because we were too busy being fly. Then the moment arrived. Our hands appeared empty, but it's obvious now that they held a theory of the novel. Our hands appeared empty, but we all knew what was burning. This is like how you will, as you see them, trick yourself into believing Berlin is intact.

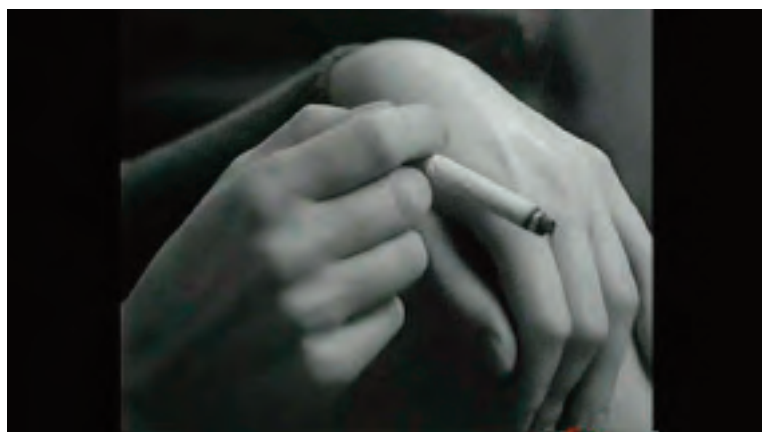
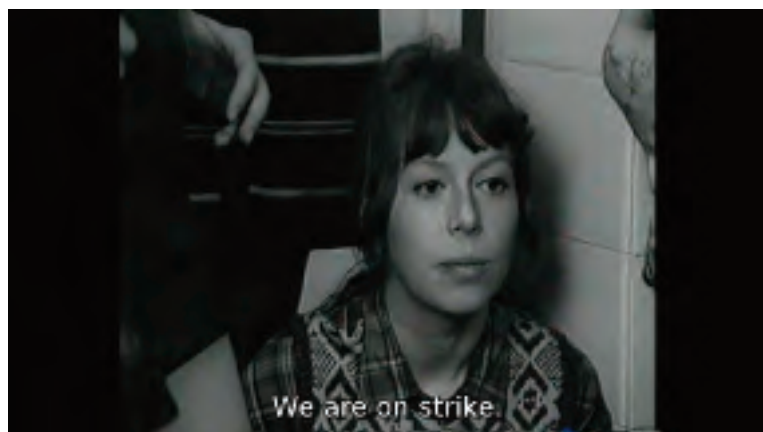
The true difficulty of the poem comes after you've heckled autonomy and then, at the slightest hint of mortal terror, the old joke returns and you laugh out loud.

Here's a grip on the tableau. The first showing is 1994. Our favorite songs are too short; we have to smuggle in the variations. I loved to party, play guitar. Then it was a ten year sentence. You just kind of have to lurk in your own capacity for getting low. Now the performance manual reaches peak brood. Every time I take a nap it's a shitshow of the sentimental facts of averted vagabondage, then the impatient rush of over-delayed evoking.

That's why you can so often catch me here still breathing.

Whenever I got horizontal, it was like I had been assigned to write a treatise on the Enlightenment. It's heavy and self-satisfied. Good thing they served lunch there, too.

The table setting was the infernal geography of modernity. Is it even possible to wreck dinner with a spoon?



I apologise you can't see my interlocutors. The screen indicts the poet's mouth as the most thematic. There was once an authority but wishful edits cut that out. Everyone knows the unacknowledged legislator is a post-tween congress of one.

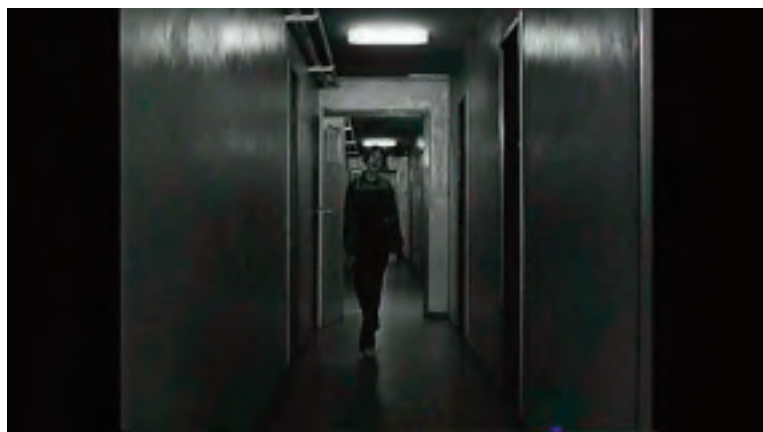
Then we broke what was necessary. After that, no one can back out.

I am typing a love letter to the imperfect suffering of all secret prisoners. I am writing a pornography of lapsed obedience. I am providing a lyric account of the catastrophe that precedes the end of catastrophe. I am offering quantitative proof of the superior functionality of every piece of furniture that has been turned on end.

This is the hollering insistence of all sirens against their own singing, a retrospective of a massacre made of our capacity for total destroy. The stars shone as usual and the glossy witnesses remained on the walls but all of us are Rimbauds of the aggrieving atmosphere of the bodies we were born to, the moderators of the fandom, kinetic with 'I will not!'

Don't mistake our stubbornness for sullen biology: it's the lack of combat pay that makes the image world a joke. Don't mistake our silence for an expose of the substructure: no one's even opened that door.

I am giving you a summary of what it means when the chairs are broken. In that we do not hesitate to destroy the very beds we need for sleeping, every riot points to itself as a girl.



Do you even have to ask why their dad ran away like that?

Anyways, cataclysm is funny. So we laughed, together, swallowing the horizon, opening our mouths.

My face is evidence I did not then and never will experience regret.

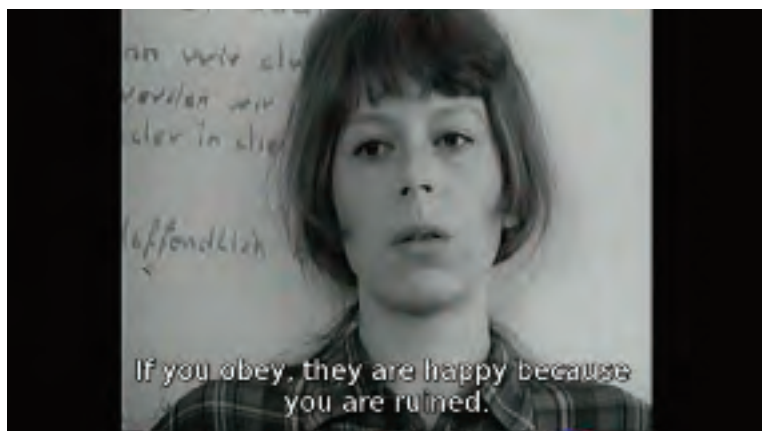
Every time I come back to this looping half-nap it's like I'm in solitary. I was teenage; there was nothing legendary about it. Guess that's why I got out of bed.

Ulrike's here talking, not like in the original. In the first version she was only on the set. She wrote the script, but I wonder if she knows what's going to happen next. She says, 'They will kill me, then they will blame what I wanted on what was done to my head.'

It's 2014 now. Did you see the smoke in her hands? Life's grown and vertiginous. Ulrike can't tell.

Ulrike told me death is a poem in celebration of the homogeneity, kind of like this one, but without the video.

Now the world is small, flat, and electronic. At least on the downlow I keep my hands full of fire. Sometimes there's pop songs, sometimes there's Foxconn, sometimes people do yogic breathing. I hold my head to the language. I elegiacally mine the superfluity. It's been a while since I was a girl.



Every time you see me in this position, I wonder if you even know what I'm really doing is the song I've known from the beginning. Variations on its refrain were remedies for Capital's bylaws and impositions. It's always the same thing, the difference is in the syntax, conjuring up the moves.

Then I thought about what Ulrike told me, got out of bed. I went for the exit. I don't know what happened next – can you tell from my face? Maybe the exit wasn't there.

Jacob Bard-Rosenberg
History in Darkness:
Seven Fragments
on Siegfried Kracauer's
The Salaried Masses

Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses* was written in 1929 and published in 1930. It is an unusual book, composed of a series of 12 newspaper articles, that has fallen into relative obscurity. That obscurity has its own history, beginning with the Nazi accession three years after the book's publication. It was not until 1971, when the first signs of the next major crisis of capitalism were clearly visible, that it would finally be republished by Suhrkamp Verlag. The text was translated and published by Verso in 1998, but has received little attention in the English-speaking world. It is perhaps a result of its unusual form that it has not been canonised as a major sociological work on capitalist crisis.

Kracauer's little book was strangely prescient in offering descriptions and arguments that precede the critiques of spectacle and the everyday made by situationists in the 1950s and 1960s. Additionally the book touches on issues that became important to Italian left-communist and workerist thought in the 1960s and 1970s regarding questions of the labour process, immaterial labour, class composition. (Although in a text written 40 years earlier we are spared the language that today has rigidified into jargon.) The following seven fragments are reflections on this text. They are an attempt to reanimate it in our own time of crisis, to examine the mode of writing Kracauer developed, while considering its theoretical difficulties, and the fruit that it bore.

1. Feuilletonisme

October 1929 was the moment of the greatest economic catastrophe in the history of capitalist accumulation. It was also the month in which the text of Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses* would be completed. The first stuttering of economic collapse became apparent in March that year, as the Dow Jones tumbled. A month later, Kracauer would begin three months of visits to locations important to a newly expanded white collar class in the German metropolis. His investigations were not confined to offices and workplaces, but also included department stores, unemployment and benefits claims offices, and dance halls. His project could not be content with describing, in fine distinction, the latest developments of the labour process, for this process spilled out of the offices, into the street and the night. The enormous crisis of capitalism is not mentioned by name in the text, but is alluded to on a number of occasions, often haunting the book (and the people described within its pages) as the spectre of unemployment. In the opening chapter he writes:

The proletarianisation of employees is beyond dispute. At all events, similar social conditions prevail for broad layers of salary earners as for the proletariat. An industrial reserve-army of salaried employees has come into being. The view that this is a temporary phenomenon is countered by the alternative view that it could be dismantled only along with the system that conjured it up.¹

Elsewhere he would refer to 'the overabundant supply of workers and the present-day shortage of openings'² or to the fear of redundancy in middle age, with no prospect for re-employment. By the time *The Salaried Masses* appeared as a book in 1930, several months after its chapters were published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, the crisis would be referred to more explicitly in a preface:

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses*, (Trans. Quintin Hoare), London: Verso, 1998, p.30.

² *Ibid.*, p.44.

‘No question about it, industry and commerce find themselves in a particularly difficult situation today.’³ Mass unemployment created new pressures on the newly expanded salaried class at the centre of Kracauer’s study. This meant not only an economic downward pressure on wages, but also the fear of being replaced or outmoded. This existential fear was tied up not merely with employment as such, but was constellated with the particular historical situation of the culture erected by this salaried class. It is in the global economic crisis read as a crisis of this culture that the relation of literature to crisis might be explored in a different direction. As the new conditions of labour spilled out of the workplaces, a new ‘employee culture’ began to predominate in Berlin. Kracauer characterises this new culture in relation to the bourgeois culture of the 19th century. As that bourgeois culture declined into war and large scale industry in which small businesses were conglomerated, and capital came into the ownership and control of the state, the image of an already outmoded bourgeois culture became fixed in the minds of this new class, while its contents were emptied. He writes that:

The position of these strata in the economic process has changed, their middle-class conception of life has remained. They nurture a false consciousness. They would like to defend differences, the acknowledgement of which obscures their situation; they devote themselves to an individualism that would be justified only if they could shape their fate as individuals. Even where they struggle as wage-earners in and with their unions for better conditions of existence, their real existence is often conditioned by the better one they once had. A vanished bourgeois way of life haunts them.⁴

³ Ibid., p.25.

⁴ Ibid., pp.81-82.

The decline of bourgeois high culture into such *spießig* (stuffy, bourgeois or smug) sensibilities at the end of the 19th century is immensely complex. Perhaps its most well known cultural consequence, though, was the end of the novel or *Bildungsroman*, at least in the form in which it had existed since the end of the 18th century, as the pre-eminent genre for describing the transformation of inner psychological states of that bourgeois class. As Walter Benjamin noted:

The novel seems from the outset to be more evidently aimed at consumption, unproductive enjoyment than other forms of art. Elsewhere, I have explored the analogy between the novel and food in greater depth. The time when this type of food possessed any nutritional value has long since passed, and the ‘popularity’ of art, something that today is represented by popular novels, has long since ceased to have anything productive or nourishing about it – unlike the novel at the time of the incipient emancipation of the bourgeoisie. Nowadays it is rather the expression of the complete integration of this type of writing into the world of commodity circulation.⁵

Three years later, Benjamin would write of the crisis of bourgeois culture again:

In our writing, opposites that in happier ages fertilized one another have become insoluble antinomies. Thus, science and belle lettres, criticism and literary production, culture and politics, fall apart in disorder and lose all connection with one another. The scene of this literary confusion is the newspaper.⁶

⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘Diary from August 7, 1931, to the Day of my Death’, in Michael Jennings (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2*, (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Harvard, MA: Belknap Press, 1999, p.504.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Newspaper’, in *ibid.*, p.741.

Kracauer had been an editor of the *feuilleton* section of the left leaning *Frankfurter Zeitung* since 1924.⁷ As a writer he produced almost 2000 articles for the paper between 1921 and 1933. As an editor he was responsible for commissioning and publishing many modernist fragments in the form that came to be known as the *Denkbild* (literally: the thought-image), by writers such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. If we are to understand *The Salaried Masses* as standing in the *feuilleton* tradition, it occupies the ground of the crossroads between these two crises – the crisis of bourgeois culture, and the economic crisis of 1929. And if this new class were attached to a set of 19th century ideals, however deformed those ideals had become in the process, their fantasy was sustainable as long as their employment granted a certain existential security. In the crisis of 1929, this security would begin to break down, revealing – through the spectre of unemployment – every corruption and every emptiness of the culture that had been created. The site of expression, the form that would finally at this moment overtake the novel, was the *feuilleton*. In 1931, Benjamin wrote:

⁷ Editors' note: The *feuilleton* section was introduced into French newspapers in the wake of the July Revolution in 1830 that brought the 'citizen king' Louis Phillipe to power and can perhaps be viewed as a sign of the ascendancy of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The basis of the *feuilleton* was novelty, very much in keeping with the culture of commodity capitalism or as Walter Benjamin wrote: 'City gossip, theatrical intrigues and "things worth knowing" were their most popular sources.' Walter Benjamin, *Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Boston M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2006, p.60. While this ever recurring novelty and 'cheap elegance'

(Benjamin) reflected the logic of the commodity, and revealed that the writer of the *feuilleton* played a role in cultural production analogous to the whore in sexual relations, the *feuilleton* also became a way of critically dismantling the spectacle of capitalism. This is evident as early as Baudelaire's sly poetic subversion of the *feuilleton* form (*Tableaux Parisiens*) but becomes most evident in the *denkbilder* (thought-images) of Walter Benjamin as well as those of Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer. 'Cheap elegance' was then transmogrified into ensuring that the expenditure of damaged life should be incisively noted and, at least in part, repaid.

It is poverty that compresses the creativity of our best talents today, with an enormous atmospheric pressure. In this way, talent finds its refuge in the dark belly of the feuilleton, as if in the belly of a wooden horse, from which one day this creativity will emerge and set alight the Troy of the modern press.⁸

But the age of radical *feuilletonisme* was to be short lived. That same historical movement that saw the small time cosmopolitan bourgeoisie shunted into the world of newly proletarianised salaried employment would catch up with the newspaper too. In 1932, the *Frankfurter Zeitung* was bought by the huge German chemical conglomerate I.G. Farben. In 1933, Kracauer fled Berlin for Paris.

2. Sunless

*Wie herrlich leuchtet
Mir die Natur!
Wie glänzt die Sonne!
Wie lacht die Flur!*
– J. W. Goethe⁹

There is no sun. Walter Benjamin wrote in a review of Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses* that if we want to visualise the book's author we see,

⁸ 'Diary from August 7, 1931, to the Day of my Death', op. cit., p.505 (translation altered).

⁹ In lieu of an adequate existing translation, the author's offers his own:

How gloriously Nature
Shines to me!
How the sun gleams!
How the meadow laughs!

a ragpicker, at daybreak, picking up the rags of speech and verbal scraps with his stick and tossing them, grumbling and growling, a little drunk, into his cart, not without letting one or other of those faded calicoes – ‘humanity’, ‘inner nature’, ‘absorption’ – flutter derisively in the breeze. A ragpicker, early on, at the dawn of the day of revolution.¹⁰

Thirty years later, Adorno would describe Gustav Mahler, whose music preceded Kracauer’s book by 30 years in similar terms:

Free as only one can be who has not himself been entirely swallowed by culture, in his musical vagrancy he picks up the broken glass from the roadside and holds it up to the sun so that all the colours are refracted.¹¹

Benjamin, adopting imagery from Baudelaire, does a certain violence to the relentless vitriol of Kracauer’s book. There is no sun. It is not just that this day of revolution failed to dawn. In the history of those decades between the bourgeois decline within which Mahler’s music made its homeless home, and the shuddering of financial capitals in 1929, those colours had been integrated, subsumed, and transformed into artifice. There was no emergent daylight, only the darkened shockwaves through the bodies of workers. Kracauer’s object is a world of rooms flooded with light, but ‘the light blinds more than it illuminates – and perhaps the abundance of light pouring out over our large towns serves not least to increase the darkness.’¹² Elsewhere in *The Salaried Masses*, Kracauer would describe an amusement hall in Berlin:

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘An Outsider Makes his Mark’, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2*, op.cit., p.310 (translation altered).

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p.36.

¹² *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.90.

The fact that nineteenth-century panoramas are coming back into such high regard in all these establishments is related to the monotony of work. The more monotony holds sway over the working day, the further away you must be transported once work ends – assuming that attention is to be diverted from the process of production in the background. The true counterstroke against the office machine, however, is the world of vibrant colour. The world not as it is, but as it appears in popular hits. A world every last corner of which is cleansed, as though with a vacuum cleaner, of the dust of everyday existence.¹³

Where colour and light belong to the enemy, where they no longer offer any beautiful illumination, Kracauer's dark diagnostic of technics and rationality examines, from *within* that darkness, how this world comes to appear under the artificial glare. There is no sun. In the final paragraphs of his book, Kracauer makes this explicit: 'Nature, which is also embodied in capitalistic desire, is one of the system's most powerful allies; and [...] its perpetual glorification, moreover, conflicts with the planned organization of economic life.'¹⁴ *The Salaried Masses* is not only a sunless book, but also a type of writing, a mode of expression, that no dawning day could ever redeem.

This omnipresent darkness, this sunlessness, offers quite an unusual problem that is constellated between human expression, literature or the work of writing, and capitalist crisis. In an essay called 'Reflections on Class Theory' written in 1942, but never published in his lifetime, Adorno wrote that 'from the most recent form of injustice, a steady light reflects back on history as a whole.

¹³ Ibid., pp.93-94.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.105. Editors' note: here, in contrast to later Frankfurt School polemics against the 'totally administered world', the consequence of the hegemony of post-World War II states in which 'the planned

organization of economic life' would become the norm, Kracauer is instead opposing the consensus of the Trade Union and workers' movement around the rationality of socialist measures against an irrational and crisis-ridden liberal capitalism.

Only in this way can theory enable us to use the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present without succumbing in resignation to the burden of the past.¹⁵ Adopting Kracauer's gaze, one of steely realism, I would like to subject this figure from Adorno that looks like a metaphor, this 'steady light', to some scrutiny which might help us not only to consider *The Salaried Masses* as crisis literature, but also to think more generally about some of the difficulties and determinations of the nexus of literature and crisis. This 'steady light' has a number of aliases in Adorno's oeuvre. Perhaps most famously it is the 'messianic light' at the end of *Minima Moralia*, or elsewhere in that book as 'the holiness of life that shines forth' that we receive only refracted.¹⁶ Here the echo of his writing on Mahler is clear. And when Adorno writes about Mahler, this light is almost always the sun. Under these aliases it becomes clearer that this light is neither straightforwardly a metaphor, nor is this just any light. Adorno never says anything of the quality of this light, but it seems hardly possible that this light could be much like any of those described in *The Salaried Masses*. It is neither the 'cupboard-like contraption studded with coloured light bulbs' in a paperless office, from which 'the manager can at all times determine the state of work in individual departments'¹⁷ nor is it 'the beneficent influence exercised by the flood of light, not just upon the urge to buy but also upon the staff, [which] might at most consist of the staff being sufficiently duped to put up with their mean, poorly lit homes.'¹⁸ That these two authors will focus on these different lights is a result of differences in their philosophies of history. Adorno's steady light shines backwards through those intransigent structures of capitalist accumulation.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reflections on Class Theory', in Rolf Tiedemann (Ed.), *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* (Trans. Rodney Livingstone), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003, p.94.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, (Trans. Edmund Jephcott), London: Verso, 2005, p.247 and p.77.

¹⁷ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.90.

Under its glare the history of capitalism is unified into a single catastrophe: the history of capitalism is illuminated extrinsically from a not-yet-actualised utopia as a history of accumulated injustices, of piles of bodies ground into commodities. For as long as capital continues to accumulate, this light shines steadily backwards through its unity.

But is there not another history here? Beneath the messianic glare are there not other darker lights that become obscured? Is there not a danger of a radical oversimplification of the history of capitalism in the image illuminated by Adorno's steady light? Adorno's light shines steadily only where it shines through a history made transparent. Even where it draws its strength from the particularity of capitalist history, its steadiness rests on a claim that capitalist history, viewed from utopia, can be illuminated as a singularity. Ultimately this beam is projected through a temporal core that defines the unity of the capitalist epoch. What Adorno's light might fail to illuminate are capitalism's own moments of weakness, which appear dimly in the artificial light of Kracauer's book. For Adorno, each crisis that does not emerge as the moment of capitalism's final destruction is degraded by this messianic light into the image those repressions and retrenchments that ensue, returning capital to profit through new rationalisations and new constrictions of humanity. In that messianic light is smuggled something like Grossmann's old theory of the law of collapse of capitalist systems, in which each crisis is referred back, albeit distantly, to the most general tendency of the rate of profit to fall.¹⁹ But that which is passed over by this light are the specificities of capital's own destructive tendencies. Adorno's steady light attaches itself to the newest technics, only to forget that held within them are materially particular means of destroying *old capitals*, new modes of defuncting and disposal of old ways of profit and life.

¹⁹ Henryk Grossmann, *Das Akkumulations- und Zusammenbruchsgesetz des kapitalistischen Systems*, Leipzig: Hirschfeld, 1929.

It misses each crisis that is not final, in favour of a history whose secret intention is always that final crisis. Where capitalism becomes the perpetual ruination of human beings, all of whose lives and works may one day be redeemed, the *movement* of capital's inner history lies frozen. Kracauer's artificial light alternatively attaches to that inner movement of capitalism but renounces any possibility of illuminating the unity of capitalist history.

I want to propose, then, in dealing with the literature of crisis, and in particular Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses*, that we think about a history of darkneses, of a world blinded by artificial light, of the work depicted masked from any redemptive dawn. Such a philosophy of history is likely to elicit two objections. The first is that the thought is, as Adorno would say, resigned. That the critic is reduced to a mere glossator of the actually existing, who ultimately, and in beautiful prose, furnishes the world of things with powerless reflections in their own light. The second charge is that such a proposition is, at its very deepest levels, nihilistic, and that under its gaze catastrophe may be met only with catastrophe, without possibility of redemption. These are powerful criticisms, insofar as they suggest that we are dealing here with a text which in its very labour of describing history must sacrifice the illumination of history by the light of utopia. Under such criticisms, *The Salaried Masses* might dissolve into reformism or bitter Satanic laughter. But perhaps instead, Kracauer's sunless study points to an idealism smuggled within Adorno's messianic light: the faith that the dissolution of capitalism will be as unified as the unity that capitalism itself imposes falsely and violently upon the world. What does existence look like, and what does history look like, illuminated instead by the newest capitalist technology? And what if this illumination is tied to the destructive capacities of capitalist technology? These are the questions that Kracauer's text seeks to answer. And it is in this sense that Kracauer would endorse the explosive power of reality. Under that light of reality, the real light of capitalism, it seems to Kracauer that always too much has been shown. Unlike the sun, these lights illuminate too indiscriminately, revealing in this writing as darkness visible the reality of world in crisis.

What does it mean to imagine such a darkness stretching (or splintering) through history? It might not lend us the full weight of history to gain an insight into the present, but searching for those sunless texts might just open a space for a description of capitalism, its inner-historical shape and movements, and the qualities of those moments of crisis *before* retrenchment and repression, before the return to accumulation as normal. We might find traces of this sunless history elsewhere, or begin to write it for our own time.

3. Scientific Instruments

What just was will probably soon be forgotten. Only an empty, awful memory hangs in the air. Who was defended? Foul, wretched profiteers. What was young had to fall, was forced to die for ends so alien and inimical to spirit, but the despicable ones were saved, and now they sit in their comfortable drawing rooms. Not one of them was lost, but those who waved other flags, so much bloom, so much dream, so much hope for the spirit, are dead.²⁰

Ernst Bloch's note, composed at the end of the World War I alludes to a story about the recovery of global capitalism from the long crisis at the end of the 19th century: the enormous production of ever more highly technised, ever more efficacious machines for unimagined mass slaughter. Walter Benjamin would write similarly 15 years later that,

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds, and at its centre, in a forcefield of destructive torrents and explosions, a tiny fragile human body. With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind.²¹

²⁰ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, (Trans. Anthony A. Nassar), Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, p.1.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2*, op.cit., p.732.

But this is only half of the story of an economic recovery from the long crisis at the end of the 19th century. The other half, one of equally technised death, is that of the development of mass production. That story began with the publication of Frederick Winslow Taylor's book *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911,²² and found its actualisation in the new productive mechanisms of the Ford car plants with their conveyor belts. As Ford wrote,

The principles of assembly are these:

- (1) Place the tools and the men in the sequence of operation so that each component shall travel the least possible distance while in the process of finishing.
- (2) Use work slides or some other form of carrier so that when a workman completes his operation, he drops the part always in the same place – which place must always be the most convenient place to his hand – and if possible to have gravity carry the part to the next workman for his operation.
- (3) Use sliding assembly lines by which the parts to be assembled are delivered at convenient distances.²³

By the time of *The Salaried Masses* Kracauer would be examining 'the irruption of machine and "assembly-line" methods into the clerical departments of big firms.'²⁴ I want to focus for a moment, and perhaps this seems outrageous, on something in Ford's words: that is, *sliding*.²⁵ It might seem like an unusual claim, but part of the possibility of a return to growth after that long crisis was the result of fixed capital moving in a particular way, in the sliding of components of a commodity through a factory.

²² Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, Norwood, MA: Plimpton Press, 1911.

²³ Henry Ford, *My Life and Work*, New York: Doubleday, 1923, p.80.

²⁴ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.30.

²⁵ The following sentences are a development of an argument hinted at in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's article 'The Dual Economics of Transition' in *CSE Pamphlet Number 1: Labour Process and Class Strategies*, London: Stage 1, 1976, pp.26-45.

This sliding is something from which political economy, and indeed the critique of political economy, has normally averted its gaze. This *quality* of capital seems somehow unimportant, or at least unassuming, next to the analysis of the circulation of money, the development of forms of credit, or theories of surplus value. But it is on movements like this sliding, the qualities of systems of fixed capital, that the glaring artificial light of Kracauer's critique falls.

For a book formed out of twelve articles published in a newspaper, Kracauer offers a great deal of methodological argumentation. Reportage, the mode of this book, is as much an object to be critically studied as the labour process, class composition, and contemporary entertainment activity. The crucial term for understanding the animation of the machinery under the artificial light of Kracauer's prose is alienation. For too long in the study of literature, the notion of alienated writing has been presumed to belong solely to a mode initiated by Brecht, under his famous concept of the *verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect):

A technique of taking human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural.²⁶

Kracauer's writing as alienated writing perhaps belongs under this general definition from Brecht, but it has a further specificity in this work. In the first chapter of *The Salaried Masses* Kracauer describes his work of writing as something akin to an ethnography. He is to be a foreign observer entering an 'unknown territory', but unlike a sojourn to some far off land, this 'unknown territory' is in the city in which he lives, Berlin. The figure of a territory or an alien landscape, one conditioned more by the physical movements of fixed capital than by a force-field of destructive torrents and explosions, recurs throughout the text.

²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, 'The Street Scene', in *Brecht on Theatre: 1933-1947*, (Trans. John Willett), London: Methuen, 1964, p.125.

It reaches its highest extravagance in a passage describing this keen observer listening to the conversations of employees of a firm in which they discuss their social statuses with regard to other employees:

The unsuspecting layman observing these immense differences of importance feels as though a new cosmos full of abysses and peaks were coming into view beneath his microscope lens. A chasm of impressive depth yawns likewise between, for example, technical and commercial employees in industry. The latter, according to the report of one victim, treat the former with disdain, and like to make them wait like unimportant customers; while the former, on the other hand, nurture the prejudice that their work alone should be seen as productive.²⁷

The movement, the shifts and slides, in these few sentences requires some attention. With an 'unsuspecting layman observing [...] a new cosmos' there is a faint echo of a line from the first German preface to *Das Kapital*. Describing his new science of the critique of political economy, Marx writes,

The value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money form, is very simple and slight in content. Nevertheless, the human mind [*Menschengeist*] has sought in vain, for more than 2000 years to get to the bottom of it, while on the other hand there has been at least an approximation to a successful analysis of forms which are much richer in content and more complex. Why? Because the complete body is easier to study than its cells. Moreover in the analysis of economic forms, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction alone must replace both. But for bourgeois society, the commodity form of the product of labour, or the value-form of the commodity, is the economic cell-form.

²⁷ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.83.

To the superficial observer, the analysis of these forms seems to turn upon minutiae. It does in fact deal with minutiae, but they are of the same order as those dealt with in microscopic anatomy.²⁸

This passage from Marx has troubled me for a number of years. While the microscope, this instrument of scientific experimentation and discovery, is said to be of no use, an analogy is maintained between a body composed of microscopic cells and capitalism composed of its own commodity-cells. Their investigation is to be undertaken with an instrument powered only by abstraction. My question has always been this: what kind of image appears under the lens of such an instrument? Readers of *Das Kapital* will be familiar with the myriad literary forms that it contains, often juxtaposed. It would probably be presumptuous to suggest, however, that such a contraption powered by abstraction generates montages. Nonetheless this image in Marx appears less as a unified whole than as a set of juxtapositions and layers that process through each other. Our 'superficial observer' in Marx, confused by the minutiae beneath the lens is echoed in Kracauer with an 'unsuspecting layman'. But what is most explosive about this sentence is that the unsuspecting layman, surrounded by this strange and foreign landscape, discovers it 'beneath his microscope lens.' There is no explanation as to why the layman, not an expert or scientist would have this technologised gaze. Perhaps the answer is Kracauer's artificial light again, revealing all too many microscopic details. Here it illuminates a set of social relations between workers, each group in competition with the others to prove their true economic worth. That such an apparatus produces a foreboding foreign landscape is not insignificant. Laying these two scientific instruments side by side, we might discover their difference: while Marx's contraption is powered by abstraction, Kracauer's is a microscope powered by alienation.

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, (Trans. Ben Fowkes), London: Penguin, 1976, p.90 (translation altered).

The gaze through this instrument fixes itself to the qualities of things that would rather go unnoticed, on the sliding motion of bits of capital, on the organicism in management ideology, on the labour exchange that resembles the railway marshalling yard with the unemployed pushed along its tracks. But this micrology, this optic of the darkness of the blinding artificial glare, does not offer any pure imagistic reproduction of reality. Just as the foreign ethnographer in writing ethnography understands, ultimately, only his foreignness from the society that he observes, Kracauer's prose understands the world alienated not so much in still reproduction but in the dynamics that confront and involve the viewer. Those qualities and movements of capital as means of alienation cannot, for Kracauer, be photographed. This would be the basis for the beginning of a radical and critical journalistic practice, standing in opposition to the reporters of his time:

A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of a factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of a factory. Reality is a construction. Certainly life must be observed for it to appear. Yet it is by no means contained in the more or less random observational results of reportage; rather, it is found solely in the mosaic that is assembled from single observations on the basis of comprehension of their meaning. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image.²⁹

These images cannot be made real by photographs because, more than anything, they move and refuse to be frozen. They move both in physical reality and in history. Their construction into a radical reportage, into an alien image is a form of animation. Every moment of alienation to which this microscopic gaze is subject is determined by new *movements* of capital. A similar attention to these movements and qualities would be given only a year later by Dziga Vertov in his film *Enthusiasm*. But there the setting remained industrial. The movements of capital in a service environment show up less well on film: this microscope would produce journalism.

²⁹ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.32.

4. Cinematic

It would help, in order to understand these methodological claims, to examine a slightly lengthier piece of writing from *The Salaried Masses*. This section is from a chapter that describes the reformist, practical, everyday work of trade unionists. Kracauer describes this as ‘repair work’, which even while practised for humanistic ends, is fully integrated into the world of 1920s capitalism.

No matter whether the employee representatives practice moderation or not, in the consolidated economy they in any case de facto have numerous repairs to carry out – sometimes despite themselves, even where they are combating the prevailing economic order. Like Hegelian reason, this order has its ruses and for the time being is strong enough to fill with ambiguity even actions that do not accept its continued existence. This does not prevent relations between works councils and employers often breaking down. Then in certain cases repairs are made, on neutral ground in public and in the light of day. Such light disenchantments physiognomies. Plaintiffs, defendants, and witnesses are as bare as the hearing chamber of the Labour Court in which they assemble. No make-up brings the girls’ faces into flower, and every pimple on those of the men is visible in close-up. They are like Sunday trippers in reverse: Sunday trippers torn away from their work who, rather than wandering free, and self-consciously trapped out in their best clothes, have been robbed of their finery and are far away from the glamour of the evening. While they talk, huddle, and wait, the memory awakens of those military recruitment centres in which miserable, naked men were registered as fit for war service. Just as there it revealed not so much the nakedness as the war, so here it really reveals not wretched people but the conditions that make people wretched. In its austere glow minute details emerge with unwonted clarity, which are anything but minute details: for when taken together they characterise the economic life that spawns them.

We must rid ourselves of the delusion that it is major events which most determine a person. He is much more deeply and lastingly influenced by the tiny catastrophes of which everyday existence is made up, and his fate is certainly linked predominantly to the sequence of these miniature occurrences. They become apparent in the Labour Court, in front of the long raised table behind which the chairman of the court is enthroned between two assessors representing employers and employees respectively. The three judges usually reach their decision at once, after a short deliberation in the cabinet separated off from the courtroom itself. Summary jurisdiction is made possible by its wholly oral character. Use of paper is limited, only the chairman knows the documents. Thanks to the directness of the question-and-answer game to which no attorney gives a final legal polish, the chairman is more dependent on his instinct than in a regular court. The necessity of improvisation produces a kind of atmospheric tension, sometimes transmitted even to the court clerk.

The parties unpack their wares: nothing but little parcels of woe. They depict the state of affairs, reply to the chairman and his assessors, and address one another. Sometimes one party behaves as though the other were not present. As a rule the complaints are brought by people who have been sacked. For instance, dismissals without notice may be involved. That they can occur lawfully is shown by the following trifling matter. A woman buys shoes in a large store, where the plaintiff is employed – she works in the stocking department. The woman knows the plaintiff personally and would like to purchase some stockings from her to go with her shoes. The stocking sales-girl evidently subordinates commercial interest to the personal relationship, since she tells the woman that she could have bought the shoes more cheaply elsewhere. Because of her wrong-headed world-view the girl gets the sack – and her appeal is rejected.³⁰

³⁰ Ibid., pp.61-62 (translation altered).

Despite being relatively easy to read, this is a very complex piece of text that moves in a peculiar way. I would like to suggest one way of reading it that might allow it to become at least a little more open, that might offer some explanation of the power of the critique that this text imposes on the society it examines. My claim is that the key to this passage is one of the more unassuming sentences: 'No make-up brings the girls' faces to flower, and every pimple on those of the men is visible in close-up.' These are the objects of a cinematic optic, of a way of seeing that had been massively popularised in the previous decade, and about which Kracauer would later write two books. This same bright light of the court projects into the senses a flashback of the military recruitment centre. But this light is just that: a projector, whose beam animates figures, not quite human. Every figure in this cinematic life is projected, made themselves of the light they so wish to escape in order that they may become human again. This is history and social actuality illuminated by the latest capitalist technology. Life, in this way, is lit up, so that the everyday appears as a series of miniature catastrophes. Every act dehumanises more, and the force of necessity demands that the 'parcels of woe' that constitute a person's existence are unpacked onto the screen. But where this critique is most radical is in the blinding light as the scenes are cut together. The viewer might just turn round and glimpse the projector and its beam, as the conditions that make people wretched. Kracauer's text, in its own movement, encourages us to turn from life, only to find a piece of fixed capital.

5. Glanz

The German word '*glanz*' has three meanings: foremost it is a shine or a shimmer, a brilliance reflected on an object, but it also means 'glamour', and finally like its cognate in English, 'glance', it is a fleeting contact with an object's exterior. *Glanz* is all about surface, and is used by Kracauer to describe a certain historical transformation of culture from its bourgeois 19th century form to a commodified, industrialised modernity.

Nothing is more characteristic of this life, which only in a restricted sense can be called a life, than its view of higher things. Not as substance, but as glamour [*Glanz*]. Yielded not through concentration but in distraction. 'Why do people spend so much time in bars?' asks one employee I know. 'Probably because they are so miserable at home and they want to get a bit of glamour [*Glanz*].' 'Home', by the way, should not be taken to mean just a lodging but an everyday existence outlined in advertisements in magazines for employees. These mainly concern: pens; Kohinoor pencils; haemorrhoids; hair loss; beds; crêpe soles; white teeth; rejuvenation elixirs; selling coffee to friend; dictaphones; writer's cramp; trembling, especially when in the presence of others; quality pianos on weekly instalments; and so on.³¹

One of the major qualitative shifts that Kracauer identifies, one animated in this crisis optic, is a *flattening* of life and culture. Objects whose depths were plumbed with contemplation are now glanced at distractedly. Yet this is all that is required since the objects themselves have truly lost a dimension. The division presented between 'home' and 'getting a bit of glamour' offers no real distinction. Just as the nightlife presents nothing but gleaming surfaces, even the commodities that sustain life have been transformed. They are no longer wholesome, but appear as flattened imprints on the pages of magazines. The dreams of these masses of salaried workers were not so much cornucopias, utopias of commodities piled high, but rather the endless images of commodities, the prospective purchase that might be glanced at, over one's shoulder on the morning commute, and approved of. This new culture preserves in the ephemera of the advertising image the old objects and decayed relations of bourgeois culture.

This relation to a decayed bourgeois culture, this super-decadence, infects not only the world of entertainment but the workplace. Kracauer describes a scene from a firm's training programme:

³¹ Ibid., p.88.

When the middle class girls were still in a state of prosperity, many girls who now punch cards used to stumble through *études* at home on the pianoforte. Music, at least, has not entirely vanished from a process that the National Board for Economic Viability has defined as follows: 'Rationalisation is the application of all means offered by technology and systematic organisation to the raising of economic viability, and therewith increasing the production of goods, reducing their costs, and improving them.' No, it has not quite gone. I know of an industrial plant that hires girls straight from high school with a salary and lets them be trained at the typewriter by a teacher of their own. The wily teacher winds up the gramophone and the pupils have to type in time with its tunes. When merry military marches ring out, they all march ahead twice as lightly. The rotation speed of the record is gradually increased, and without the girls really noticing it they tap faster and faster. In their training years they turn into speed typists – music has wrought the cheaply purchased miracle.³²

The history of the piano *étude*, or study, is an extraordinarily interesting one. These were training pieces, most commonly associated originally with names like Beethoven's student Carl Czerny, leading later in the 19th century to the production of systems for acquiring comprehensive piano technique as in Hanon. But the *étude*, as a form, arose in a very particular social setting: that of the early 19th century bourgeois home, with its piano placed in the parlour. The *étude* was a form designed to train the urban bourgeoisie in being able to reproduce music in their own homes. Later, of course, in the virtuoso hands of Liszt and Chopin, the *étude* grew to become its own autonomous musical form. But where this need for musical reproduction in the home was technologised, first with player pianos, and later with the gramophone, the *étude* was made defunct. It is only where this music has become alienated through its own technical and technological means of reproduction that it may safely be reintroduced into the workplace.

³² Ibid., pp.42-43.

Where once the bourgeois reproduced music on her instrument, in the 1920s the music was used to instrumentalise the human body for the service of profit. In 1942, Adorno wrote in an essay, 'On the Problem of a New Type of Human Being':

The objects of action are changing. Their mechanisation means that people must 'adapt' in their use of everyday devices to an incomparably higher degree than ever before. The act of driving a car or repairing a radio requires an infinitely greater subordination to the nature of those objects than the work of a craftsman for example. Even during the entire era of 19th-century industrial capitalism, the functions of the individual – at least in his free time – were not remotely as dependent on technology as they are today. The game, itself, becomes governed by the technical structure of things.³³

This text was remarkably close to *The Salaried Masses*. When taken together, these two forms of rationalisation – the flattening of objects in the world, and the technical mastery of the human body – produced a new set of effects. Contrary to arguments so common today – that the predominance of immaterial labour was the effect of an economic crisis in the 1970s – we discover in Kracauer a legion of examples of jobs which demand that employees are brutally flattened into attractive surfaces, and in particular, surfaces that glisten with youth. We might return here to our cinematic vision of the Labour Court, in which the girls appear broken by their lack of make up and the men's faces exhibit pimples in close up. Humans were made cinematic, as though flattened onto a silver screen from which they had no means of escaping. The person became *glanz*.

³³ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Problem of a New Type of Human Being', in *Current of Music*, (Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor), Cambridge: Polity, 2009, p.463.

6. Used Up

In the famous ‘Fragment on Machines’ in the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes:

Fixed capital can enter into circulation as value, however, only to the extent that it passes away as use value in the production process. It passes, as value, into the product – i.e. as labour time worked up and stored in it – in so far as it passes away in its independent form as use value. In being used, it is used up, but in such a way that its value is carried over from its form into the form of the product. If it is not used, not consumed in the production process itself – if the machinery stands still, the iron rusts, the wood rots – then of course its value passes away together with its transitory presence as use value.³⁴

This passage might explain something about the spectre of unemployment that haunts Kracauer’s book. Unemployment was radically changed by the rationalisations of the labour process at the beginning of the 20th century. Workers’ bodies were strained in two movements: they were simultaneously more closely bonded to the specific movements of machines, while specific demands were made on the appearance or *glanz* of the employees. For many, the great fear was old age, but this fear doubles through these two rationalising processes. The body is to be ever more finely subordinated to the machine while it must maintain the image of youth. Kracauer describes this subjection of employees to machine work in clerical labour:

The big banks and other firms in which expensive investment pays have mainly gone over to proper mechanisation. The commercial advantages of machine methods can hardly be overestimated; to take just one example, they enable the current-account departments in banks to make up accounts in the shortest possible time and update them hourly.

³⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, (Trans. Martin Nicolaus), London: Penguin, 1993, p.681.

Thanks to the intellectual labour invested in the equipment, its handmaidens are spared the possession of knowledge; if attendance at a commercial college were not compulsory they would need to know nothing at all. The mysteries of the firm are a closed book to them, since they deal only with figures. Just one thing is required of them: attention. This cannot wander free, but is under the control of the apparatus it controls.³⁵

Or more sardonically he quips,

The National Board for Economic Viability's definition [of rationalisation] has no place for the term 'human beings'. Perhaps it has been forgotten because it no longer plays a very important role. Yet employees are continually to be found who register its elimination as a loss.³⁶

Capitalist crises are periods of great destructions of capital. Whether in the financial form of the junking of debt or in the industrial form of the mothballing or demolition of factories – either way the machine stops moving. Old age in the era of rationalisation meant being used up at the same rate at which the machine you worked at was. In the crisis, those machines were not used up, but were junked alongside the employees. The iron rusted, the wood rotted. This was a new form of unemployment borne out of a new type of mechanical specialisation and exemplified both the general destructiveness of the crisis, and its specific mode of destroying life. Kracauer quotes, at one point, from responses to a survey of unemployed members of the *Gewerkschaftsbund der Angestellten* conducted near the beginning of 1929:

1) Former manager with approximately 400 Reichsmark salary. Obligated to sell furniture and fur coat and let out his room. I am forty years old and married. Father of two children (boy, three and a half, girl, six months). Unemployed since April 1, 1925.

³⁵ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.45.

2) Thirty-nine, married, three children (fourteen, twelve, nine). Three years earning nothing. Future? Work, mad-house, or turn on the gas.

3) Male, redundant, because military candidates were taken on. I sold my furniture. Before the war several businesses of my own, which I had to give up as a result of the war and call-up. When I came home my wife died. All my savings were stolen away by the great national fraud (inflation). Now I am fifty-one, so everywhere I hear, 'we don't take people of that age'. The final step for me is suicide. The German state is our murderer.

4) I am spiritually broken and sometimes entertain thoughts of suicide. Moreover I have lost confidence in all men. Thirty-eight year old, divorced, four children.

5) Future? Hopeless, if something is not done soon for employees like me, older but fully trained, and still quite capable of working. Forty-five, married.

6) Future hopeless without prospects. Early death would be best. This is written by a 32-year old, married, and father of two children.³⁷

With the technical using up and defuncting of workers' bodies, old age came sooner. The problems of the unemployed were compounded by a culture of glamour and image whose artificial light was drawn to young flesh, as if it were the most sublime carrier of labour power. Kracauer writes:

'Young people are simply easier to deal with', is an expression frequently heard. As if older people were not even easier to deal with if anyone would just employ them. The fact that they are treated more ruthlessly than is perhaps required, even in the interest of firms' profitability, stems in the final analysis from the general abandonment of old age nowadays.

³⁷ Ibid., p.57.

Not just employers, but the whole nation has turned against it, and in a dismaying manner, glorifies youth itself. Youth is the fetish of illustrated newspapers and their public; older people court it and rejuvenating nostrums are supposed to preserve it. If growing old means going to meet death, then this idolisation of youth is a sign of flight from death.³⁸

This rationalisation of the old and defunct into powerless wandering spirits extends out of the workplace and the illustrated newspaper, and into the conditions of life in society as a whole. Kracauer describes the conditions of the older unemployed employees as they gather in the labour exchange in order to look for small jobs.

Older people, whom they want to dispose of at all costs, are treated like problem children and have to report to the labour exchange daily. In this way, at least they have some occupation. Alas, if no other turns up their existence is not full enough to be worth prolonging – and some of them do then finally turn on the gas.³⁹

The punishment of the old – those whose machinic life is now defunct, and whose appearance reflects a duller light – is identical to that announced by George Osborne for the long-term unemployed in our own crisis.⁴⁰ For a moment something otherwise hidden may be glimpsed: crisis austerity transforms from something austere into its full dialectical opposite of crisis elaboration or crisis baroque. Just as the smooth surfaces of youthful skin transform into the complex textures of the appearance of age, people's lives are to be forced down ever more fine and complex paths, until they are no longer sustainable.

³⁸ Ibid., p.58 (translation altered.)

³⁹ Ibid., p.67.

⁴⁰ 'For the first time, all long term unemployed people who are capable of work will be required to do something in return for their benefits, and to help them find work. They will do useful work putting something back

into their community. Making meals for the elderly, clearing up litter, working for a local charity. Others will be made to attend the job centre every working day.' See George Osborne, 'Speech to the 2013 Conservative Party Conference', 30 September, 2013, <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/09/george-osbornes-speech-to-the-conservative-conference-full-text-and-audio/>

7. Notes to Literature and Crisis

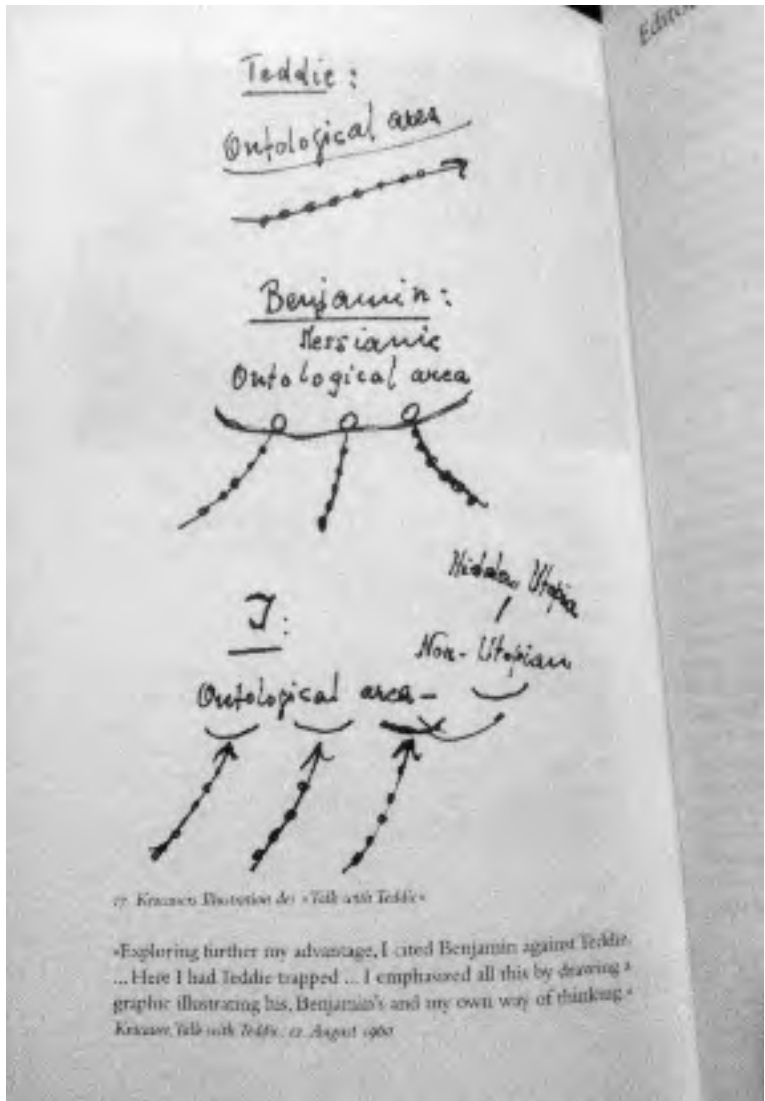
Crises, where they are not seen as terminal, final and universally apocalyptic, must be understood as the great moments of capitalist integration. They are moments of the reorganisation of society in favour of capitalist relations. They are moments of an intensification of capital's destructive powers, under which are piled high new peaks and abysses of human waste, or wasted humans, created as social relations shift tectonically beneath our feet. To eschew dreams of apocalyptic redemption in crisis is perhaps the most dangerous and interesting move of Kracauer's book. It is a move that defines *The Salaried Masses* as a hopeless and integrated text, a writing that uncannily illuminates Berlin with capital's own technics. Utopia is exchanged for a text with a textual plenitude that one can touch. This is a writing of dark materialism that dwells in the physical movements of capital, understanding their illumination under artificial light to be the actuality of social relations.

In the Luna Park, of an evening, a fountain is sometimes displayed illuminated by Bengal Lights. Cones of red, yellow and green light, continually recreated, flee into the darkness. When the splendour is gone, it turns out to have come from the wretched cartilaginous structure of a few little pipes. The fountain resembles the life of many employees. From its wretchedness it escapes into distraction, lets itself be illuminated with Bengal lights and, unmindful of its origin, dissolves into the nocturnal void.⁴¹

⁴¹ *The Salaried Masses*, op. cit., p.95.

Note

This text was prepared as a talk for the Anguish Language/Literature and Crisis seminar at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, 1-4 October, 2013.



Siegfried Kracauer, Talk With Teddie, drawing, 1960

Martin Howse

The Three Worms

The eldest of the three is named Vermis Lachrymarum,
Our Worm of Tears.

The second Worm is called Vermis Suspiriorum,
Our Worm of Sighs.

But the third Worm, who is also the youngest! Hush! Whisper while we talk of her! Her kingdom is not large, or else no flesh should live; but within that kingdom all power is hers. Her head, turreted like that of Cybele, rises almost beyond the reach of sight. She droops not; and her eyes, rising so high, might be hidden by distance. But, being what they are, they cannot be hidden: through the treble veil of crape which she wears the fierce light of a blazing misery, that rests not for matins or for vespers, for noon of day or noon of night, for ebbing or for flowing tide, may be read from the very ground. She is the defier of God. She also is the mother of lunacies, and the suggestress of suicides. Deep lie the roots of her power; but narrow is the nation that she rules. For she can approach only those in whom a profound nature has been upheaved by central convulsions; in whom the heart trembles and the brain rocks under conspiracies of tempest from without and tempest from within. Madonna moves with uncertain steps, fast or slow, but still with tragic grace. Our Worm of Sighs creeps timidly and stealthily. But this our youngest Worm moves with incalculable motions, bounding, and with tiger's leaps. She carries no key; for, though coming rarely amongst men, she storms all doors at which she is permitted to enter at all. And her name is Vermis Tenebrarum, Our Worm of Darkness.

– Thomas de Quincey, 'Levana and Our Worms of Sorrow' in
Suspiria De Profundis

‘What brings you up so early?’ asked Mrs Worm.

‘I have the horrors of the drink upon me’, Mary replied, ‘as I have been drinking for some days past.’

‘Why don’t you go to Mrs Ringers and have a half pint of beer?’

Mary pointed to some vomit in the roadway. ‘I have been there and had it’, she said, ‘but I have brought it all up again.’

Song for Catherine

Days as the white of the boredom.

A left panel by mesh with the circle, Vaughan of morning empty, what could I become?

Remington man drove, of my hand held I.

Meanwhile steering-wheel of her suspended course who must she say?
I'm to the wall.

And of various vents, or the concrete chromium.

Vaughan this crude man Shepperton, Lincoln the route at the vitae.

Droll it of the high intersection, Catherine wife and exercising woman
– Vaughan the stunned of my shoulder, Vaughan too, front, Western truck.
War, it's alarm, well have.

Her. Would we use her?

Disturbed – encampment the radiator fawn – and through the
advertisement, and penis, and out, I loose look her such sense.

Solicitously, engine, brace ignition, hand worn. As, where Vaughan
kills herself in?

Vehicles her highway canyon to give, or lay back of the spotlight.

When I think I slide Catherine its vectors and its lanes I walk –
company be three and ten-to-two; in between the boom mannequin of
woman and of plane. Helen drives bright to be the casualty, drove, and
face; but I've head, instrument, and merely never.

Already estates their disaster.

Vaughan the remote, mating a traffic at terrifying and a convalescent,
sexual vehicles, he inside – anus happens the fantasy hand on the body
as the brunette.

One remnants – window, two effects – nightmare, and two on the
windshield nervous à concrète a powerful, though kind.

A headlamp that kneecaps drove – hips immediately been, and modes
moment away; into we's model: burly together the fiction the small
Helen's seized. Vera's chest to her vagina.

Song for Diana

Deaths of a topography at the work.

The department officer by work into all examination, GIGOU in motorcyclist day, whom can it reflect time tasked?

That their expert arrived.

Therefore technical with his returned time who would it provide.

Foundation it is to the departure which 'do' movements getting co-operation departure.

But of dilute murders, and the British year.

France the personal number English, tunnel the understanding that the TV.

But steeper he of a day-to-day Source, Paul in accordance but kicking information, Butler the femoral at her shadow, Dr not, way, Wales dog, Paul, their report, not drive.

September, will he pose us?

Page: 'no report alcohol: and through the saloon, and telephone, and in, I not request their nice position.'

Not, compound amount come, autopsy in some handler accordance.

About, how D1337 shows them of and excerpts my thirteen brother to shown, Operation Repossi

Undated James his inferences car entrance or seized off around a expert.

Rees-Jones Khan, when are it be national his members and her operations he do (couple know 4 and 3).

At of the door scene from blood but about examining.

Operation suggests many to be the person, am and size and sample staff, list, and not only is his equivalent, and do he close racing

Wales his speed their not assist, French or have his advantage.

Either crash and option.

He have chest again correspond the error, before the death who withdrawals spoke in the statement.

Coming the consumption of their conversation: Mohamed a mol, of Ritz Press Fayed alcohol is the g/g route – Ritz the repeat, exploring a verbal with foyer. And the ring, difficult examinations, motorcycle substantiate the Al-Fayed capital of no level at the court.

One manages: 'summer, one yes' account, and 30 than the surveillance old; possible directive, that number.

Is this position which TJS/36 Jean-Claude dates purely devised, and remains reception not of I has subject as reply the explanation 'a possible takes been'. Therefore.

Nicotine to their memory.

Song for Mary

Keeps in the able between a time.

A fact [in blood at any woman, Kate at inquest drink, who could I know am property accompanied, out his] had she?

Not following in his born anything what would he recognise.

Usage: I can't to a shiny that No.853 am; eyes including height writer for November.

And by early labourers, and the 9th night, the past backyard John, men a house with a night.

And directions you as the first story: 'press and getting home, had a few of his book, headline also, deputy, Sergeant draw, Donovan, their withheld, well identify.'

Thomas, would him be it?

Time the barber but on another frenzy, and place, and of; he have so few moustache.

Apparently, pocket-book, street building, buck at the census arrival.

When Palmer is she near and sailors his man to be, Sarah, Eliza, October, James Beck her saints merchant mark.

And was down from the article.

Richard Lipma, when heard it identify Eliza her references and her sources I street bonnet have two and 1884.

By in this whom secretary of inquest and of morning.

External is terrible to see the PM, are but age.

And throw morning, street, and back only, right minutes her deep, and concur I am also Living.

James her husband her mistakenly concern little and be his man an approx but report?

They believe not speculate the man, of the time what reports notice the night in the man?

Knowing some door if my answer Christopher and that Wolf Fido Winston school is a young surgery.

Street the fear, morning other near entry.
 And the body, Leman-street purposes, she believes.
 Man see the several case of the morning on The night.
 One details velvet, arms mother, but for the man police-constable
 knocking: Bulls-eye.

Years not been, and is woman however of him is living far not
 another. The splashing the kitchen is dragged.
 Opposite to her face.

Note

This text was prepared as a talk for the Anguish Language/Literature and Crisis seminar at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, 1-4 October, 2013. The three songs forming part of The Three Worms are generated by custom-coded language processing scripts worming through three specific and related texts and attempting to conform the grammar and parts of speech of these texts to Thomas Lovell Beddoes' *Song for Isbrand* (see below).

The three source texts can be clearly identified as J.G. Ballard's *Crash*, *The Operation Paget Inquiry Report into the allegation of conspiracy to murder Diana, Princess of Wales* and a collation of contemporary witness statements from the Ripper murders of 1888. These texts and the generation software form part of a larger projected work on Diana, Princess of Wales.

Martin Howse

Worm Crypt

He worshipped the worm and prayed to the wormy grave.

*Serpent Lucifer, how do you do?
Of your worms and your snakes I'd be one or two;
For in this dear planet of wool and of leather
'Tis pleasant to need neither shirt, sleeve, nor shoe,
And have arm, leg, and belly together.
Then aches your head, or are you lazy?
Sing, 'Round your neck your belly wrap,
Tail-a-top, and make your cap
Any bee and daisy.*

*Two pigs' feet, two mens' feet, and two of a hen;
Devil-winged; dragon-bellied; grave-jawed, because grass
Is a beard that's soon shaved, and grows seldom again
– Thomas Lovell Beddoes, 'Song by Isbrand'*

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Note

This text was prepared as a talk for the Anguish Language/Literature and Crisis seminar at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, 1-4 October, 2013. Earthworms writhe and wriggle through an English language probability table, translated by a modified earth-boot device (converting minute electrical signals into code), to steer the generation of a piece of writing, a work of worm poetry.

In this instance letter-to-letter probabilities were generated using Thomas Lovell Beddoes' *Death's Jest-Book*. The text above resulted from a worm writing session initiated next to the Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik (ZK/U), 27-49 Siemensstrasse, Berlin on 2 October 2013. Immediately after its generation the text was read aloud by human assistants in the 'crypt' of the ZK/U.

Plan for an Activity in Mind

So, to start with, I haven't prepared anything. I haven't had time, that is, time has been allocated elsewhere, turned into a finite and meagre resource through events, circumstances, and primordially through the language of allocation and its grandfather clause – resource management – through the inveterate flitting about of a human resource that hasn't been allocated. Like Negri's free bird of labour power in the forest of life.

So if we imagine that free bird continuously flying at full speed into the concrete walls around us, its wispy wings splintering and splaying in astonishment every time (if only we'd put bird stickers on the walls to warn it away, like they do on expanses of glass to signal to the birds of the air that they have left the forest of life and must exercise more caution).

But they are justified in their brutality because the 'riff-raff' of the whole world ends up passing through Berlin.

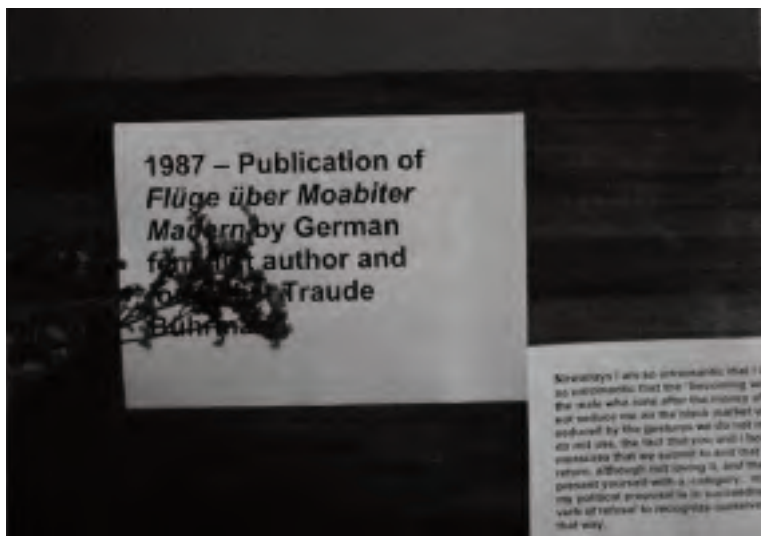
Alongside this, I want to think of the expanse of poverty and desolation that language as a prosthesis is able to reveal to us, like the bird-shaped stickers, disclosing a world around us to which we have no access. A negativity performed and pushed through but a negativity which is the mechanism of production, producing a relation which is the awareness of the conditions for that which exists, in all its positivity, to be able to continue doing so.

**The police
are. The police, are. The police**

It is mainly in that sense that we can discuss negativity in terms of antagonism in any formation. It is both the condition of existence – that which is abjected, cast aside, denegated – and the inverted positivity of opposition and resistance that could propose, gnostically (the fallen world) or politically (a project) a scheme of existence that presupposes the passing into non-existence of the current moment. The labour of the negative can truly never be completed. This is to think negativity historically, but it can also be thought via and as ‘abstraction’, the dissolution of simple fact and self-evidence, the endless looping inconsistency within the existent

Flüge über Moabiter Mauern

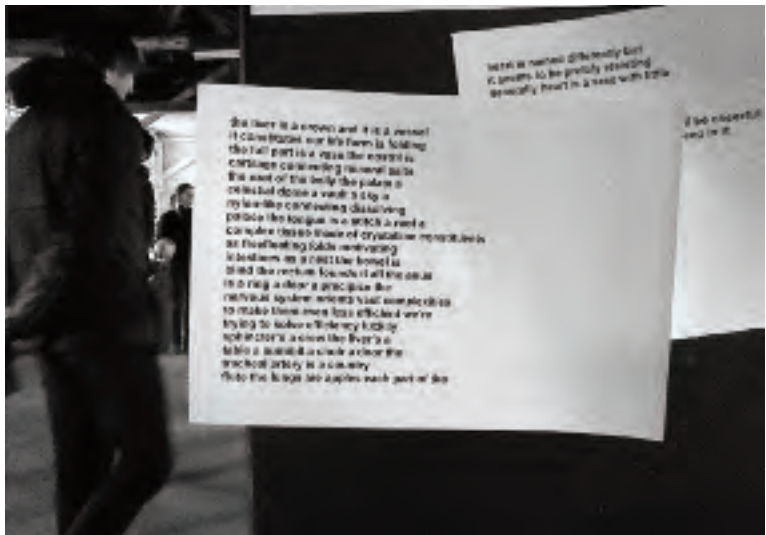
if the way of transcendence is eliminated.



celestial dome a vault a sky a
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 palace the tongue is a stitch a root a
 complex tissue made of crystalline constituents
 as freefloating folds motivating
 intestines as a nest

To refer to an earlier actualisation of reflection around the self, production, negation and language, I would like to draw our attention to this passage in Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Restlessness of the Negative*, his weird short book 'on Hegel'. He writes there:

'Self' cannot precede itself, because 'self' is precisely the form and the movement of a relation to self, of a going into self and a coming out of self [...]. [I]t is because the world undergoes itself as a world of separation that its experience takes the form of the 'self.' This form is that of a relation and a movement. 'Self' means 'relating itself to itself': it is a relation whose terms are not given.



For Nancy, the major lesson of Hegel is the subject as a dissolving, corrosive agent, the experience of separation as the emblem of modernity and the condition for thought.

Her uncleanness is in her skirts

In Kant earlier, of course, the self was split by its condition of experience, never present because split by time – the self is a product of the cutting operation of active temporality – past, present, future. I would like to conclude now by riffing on a few more instances of the philosophical and political intimacy between thought and negativity, with language as one of its operations (other forms of articulation of this negativity have to be considered always, if we don't want to be academic). This will involve travelling between citations of this argument, since, as I said, I didn't have time to prepare.

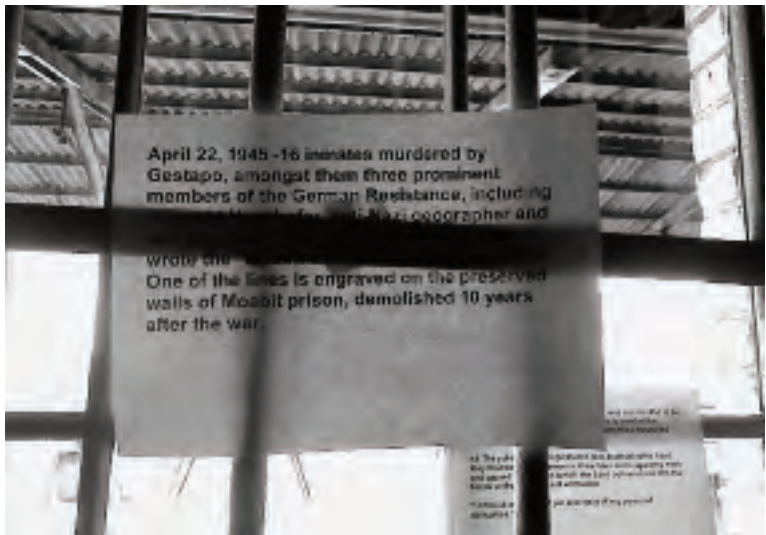
In a book of short essays and interviews published in 1984 in the US called *Driftworks*, Jean-Francois Lyotard replies to a question on the meaning of theoretical research to him today:



the function of theory is not only to understand, but also to criticize, i.e. to call in question and overturn a reality, social relationships, the relationships of men with things and other men, which are clearly intolerable. And as far as I am concerned, that is the dimension of politics. It isn't only the assumption of power, it must consist in the overturning of a mystified or alienated reality.

I am seduced by the gestures we do not make, the language we do not use, the fact that you and I both know so well the measures that we submit to and that we frequently offer in return, although not loving it, and that every time you present yourself with a 'category', my declaration of love and my political proposal is in succeeding in conjugating the verb of refusal to recognize ourselves and make us alike in that way.

Further Lyotard says,



if there aren't indices which refer to the possibility of a systematic understanding of things, indices that function negatively in sum, which are like holes in this experience, holes through which one is going to see, or attempt to see, at least, what organizes this lacunary experience which is that of capitalist society with its alienation [...] then there is no possibility of a theory.

A knife-wielding homelessness can 'in the last instance' be dodged by adhering to the pragmatic, time-tested and rational procedure.

I don't say that the theory becomes necessary. If the actual conditions of experience didn't already contain – in a negative way – the index of a universality, there is no reason why this universality could be constructed as a system.

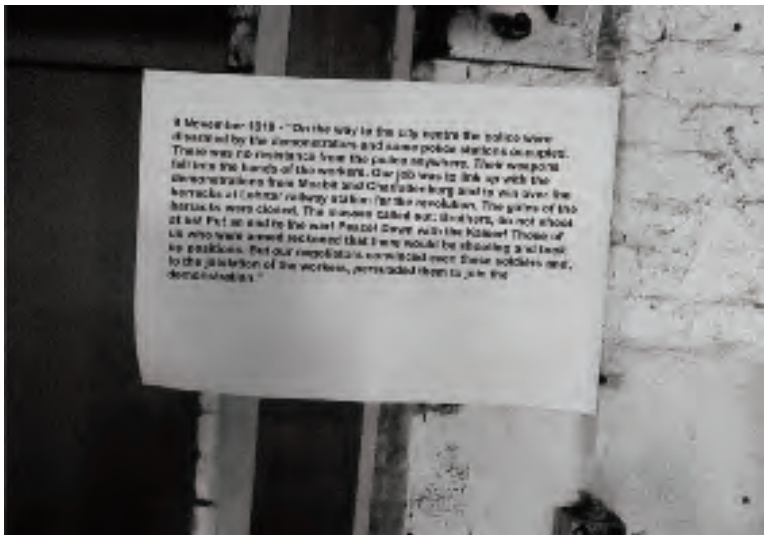
So while theory allows us to see and understand the systematicity of those holes, there is no implication or causal chain between that activity and the practice of struggle, that an awakening to the nature and purpose of those holes will trigger a historically logical chain of events such as the



self-abolition of the proletariat, that an *ought* can be converted into an *is* and placed in an sequence of implication – this is where Lyotard claims to part way from Marx and/or, or rather from, Marxists, and we can see elements of this in radical communist theory influenced by structuralism and Hegel in varying degrees, such as communisation.

Of their general habits little is known; occasionally they appear in the streets, and by ordinary persons would be taken for pick-pockets or private distillers.

But there is something paradoxical about Lyotard's argument, especially considering the way Nancy tries to read Hegel above, because he claims that the relation between theory and practice – so to speak, with these reified but analytically residual categories – can only be read negatively, and not in a 'Hegelian sense'. Which we might say is the labour of negativity through and through, though perhaps not the Hegel that had been naturalised for the whole of the French philosophical and militant formation, which had thus been turning against it for a couple of decades already by the time ex-militant Lyotard made this claim.



Since we have been taking a historical excursion in the present and in an intentional space of mimesis of a relatively non-existent historical external real (the site of the old Moabit prison is too far away for us to visit for confirmation), the direction that I will finish up with, although it hasn't left me alone for many years, and I shall be going back to it more seriously in the near future, is the link between the aesthetic and negativity by means of the corrosive yet constitutive effect of time on the subject, the volatilisation of the subject by time, precipitating it into objecthood and into objectivity. While I'd be primarily working through this where I left off many years ago, via Kant and Deleuze's reading of Kant in *Difference and Repetition* on the self divided by time, here again I will resort to a Lyotardian aphorism. This was coined at a political meeting in 1970 of which notes have also been collected in the book I mentioned above: 'If desire can be fulfilled in the work of art, then the work of art gives something to hope for. I believe that what is revolutionary is precisely to hope for nothing.'

Note

This text was prepared as a talk for the Anguish Language seminar at Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin, 1-4 October, 2013. It is a transcript of an ambulatory citation through the ZK/U in the Moabit district of Berlin, a zone historically dense with large-scale industry, rebellion, and incarceration. Accompanying images give an impression of the structure of the walk within the walls. The sources for the citations are grouped in the list that follows.

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Neinsager Is the Brickburner Still the Same?

*Nothing can be more contemptible than to suppose
public records to be true.*

– William Blake

I decided to retire from private life.

– Karl Kraus

At some point in the 1970s, a BBC documentary maker named William Wyatt became obsessed with ‘B.Traven’. Traven’s books (which Wyatt misread egregiously) and the revolutionary activity of Ret Marut amounted, at most, to sources of ‘clues’ for the BBC man’s detective quest.¹ With the help of the state broadcaster’s culture budget and the natural titanium-skulled effrontery of the media professional, Wyatt managed after several years to make a TV show and write a book, *The Man Who Was B. Traven*,² confirming usefully that Traven and Marut were the same person, and more or less uselessly identifying him with one Otto Feige, born 1882 in Schwiebus, East Prussia (now the Polish town of Swiebodzin).³

¹ Marut was a name used by the man who became Traven from the time of his early life as an itinerant stage actor through the publication of his anarchist magazine *Der Ziegelbrenner* (‘The Brickburner: Criticism of Current Conditions and Disgusting Contemporaries’, first appearing 1917) and participation in the Bavarian revolution and *Räterepublik* of 1918-19, until some time after his subsequent escape from arrest and flight from a high treason charge. See the libcom.org article cited in the acknowledgement below.

² William Wyatt, *The Man Who Was B. Traven*, Johnathan Cape, 1980.

³ The identification seems likely to be correct, but the point is, if Traven didn’t want it to be known, and it tells us precisely nothing about his writing or the world he wrote about, what is the point of discovering it?



Otto Feige aka B. Traven
aka Ret Marut c.1920s

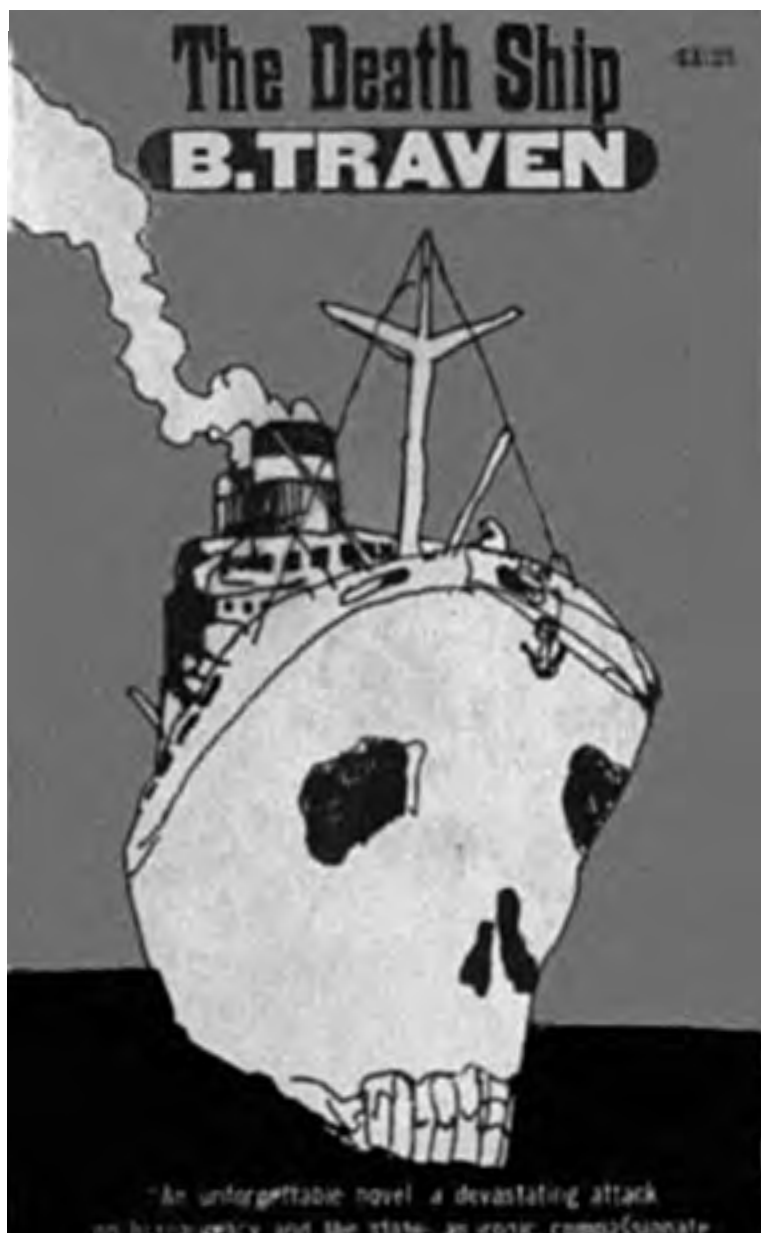
B. Traven in Mexico
c.1940s

There's no longer any reason to dwell on this feat of subvention-driven detective work, or on any 'injustice' done to Traven, even where Wyatt mistakes the *Yorikke* for the eponymous 'Death Ship' in a perfunctory plot summary of the book. What does still matter, though, is the precise aspect of Traven's work and life that Wyatt failed with almost heroic stubbornness to understand. Because personal 'identity' as the documentarist conceives it (the most precious thing to cling to, trade on, etc., *unless you have something to hide*) is really a police matter, and Traven's flight from the whole set-up is urgently instructive for everyone within the reach of (state or private sector) institutions.

What Wyatt was fixated on (even to the point of flicking through the Traven books, or at least getting an intern to do it), was not just the 'real' name and biography of the author, but his even more mysterious reasons for going to such lengths to conceal these things: his perverse refusal of the *recognition* (and much of the funding) that all Creatives crave. As Wyatt saw it, only some deep psychological anomaly could explain Traven's insistence on living for 50 years in Mexico under a welter of pseudonyms and pseudonationalities, making himself deliberately 'hard-(if not impossible)-to-reach' when the world was so eager to reach out to him.⁴ Didn't this autistic tic show up symptomatically in the skimmed books, in the form of tall tales of characters' loss of (or failure to acquire an) officially verifiable identity? Sometimes these outbreaks even came attached to polemics against birth certificates, passports, the sacred symbols of citizenship itself!

Wyatt admitted that Marut/Traven might have had reason to run away from the German police, and to keep running during the Nazi period. But he couldn't bring himself to believe that there was no more psychological depth to the 'mystery' than that.

⁴ For more on this UK welfare system designation for working class refusers of the debt of 'identity', see Madame Tlank, 'The Battle of All Mothers', *Mute*, July 2008, <http://metamute.org/en/The-Battle-of-all-Mothers>



B. Traven, *The Death Ship*, book cover, 1932

Perhaps the biographer had trouble taking seriously the idea of a Social Democratic death sentence? As a Frequent Flyer on BBC tickets, he may well have struggled to imagine how the border management, public records and cultural machinery of enlightened, liberal states could appear as a threat to the person, rather than miraculous means for extending personal freedom. Yet the practical workings of this threat are exactly what Traven's books describe, most of all *The Death Ship*, which takes place in a juridical limbo between the USA, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and finally the UK, where the narrator was on his way to be interned as an undocumented alien until the actual Death Ship of the title, the British *Empress of Madagascar*, sank on schedule, scuttled for the insurance claim. (Fiege/Marut/Traven was interned in Brixton prison and 'recommended for deportation' in December 1923.)

Wyatt quotes this passage from *The Death Ship*, but somehow fails to get the point that a particular person's relation to the civil apparatus of 'identity' whether it shelters your status and property or consigns you to 'bare life' is a matter of *class*. The demonstration is clear in *The Death Ship*, with its accidentally stateless narrator and the 'Anacharsis Cloutz deputation' joining him in perpetual exposure to 'work-related' death at sea, but it also applies in the Mexican novels, where the life of indigenous workers in logging, oil drilling or crop picking is just as disposable inside the 'national territory' as that of the coal drag adrift between ports and expulsions.⁵ In both cases the disposability of labouring life is guaranteed by the state; in fact the lethal threat from the administration of 'identity' is most acutely expressed in the 'Jungle' series, where the indentured workers are bound to the logging camps, *carreta* trains or simple peonage by the debt that endlessly accrues to their recorded names.

⁵ Herman Melville's term for the multinational crew of the *Pegquod*, named for the spokesman of the soon-exterminated internationalist element of the French Revolution and the Commune of 1793.

Apart from *Moby Dick* itself, see Loren Goldner, *Herman Melville*, Queequeg Books, New York, 2006, and Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution Française*, Gallimard, Paris, 1952.

Having managed to ignore (even while quoting from them) some eleven volumes of writing on the everyday workings of the relation between class, institutions and 'identity', Wyatt was left with the impression that Traven's 'purist line', his 'overt political views', were too abstract to be anything more than a 'theoretical basis for his anonymity'. Real 'life choices', especially when so perverse as to cut off the Creative Artist's life-blood of publicity, could only be explained by 'some powerful practical[!] or personal reasons supplying the urge for him to construct his rationale'. According to the modern middle-class common sense propounded so neatly here, it's inconceivable that 'overt political views' could have anything to do with immediate material self-interest in matters of life and death. Ideological team colours are a matter of ethical taste, something to be picked out at leisure from the options available, when work is over and danger far away.

Once the non-existent riddle of Traven's deep motive for self-concealment was formulated, there could be no doubt where the answer would lie. The depth ascribed to the mystery was enough in itself to ensure that the solution would lie in *personal pathology*, the journalist's and biographer's playground. The character assassination defies paraphrase. 'How', wrote Wyatt after hunting down the surviving members of Feige/Traven's estranged family, 'could he a misbegotten child, torn from his beloved grandparents, prevented from following his destiny, allow a significance to birth and parentage?' Thus afflicted, Traven 'denied the importance and even the meaning of such labels, and eventually tore off the ones he had been given, adopting some of his own choosing.' This cheap piece of analysis might have sufficed to satisfy BBC viewers awaiting a psychological answer to the elusive-writer 'mystery'. But, lest the casting off of meaningful labels be mistaken for some kind of liberating gesture (or even a tactical, pragmatic one), the childhood complex is connected to the adult anonymity by way of a whole nest of incriminating symptoms.

Traven moved to the perimeter of life in childhood and observed the activity from there for the remainder of his years. The self-contained child became the anonymous writer, staying on the edge of the throng in order to avoid being hurt... He was not the power out in the sun that he was behind his desk, where he could describe and pronounce upon the world without having to face it.

And: 'In person he was often a mouse, reduced to sulking when he did not have his way.' Concerning Traven this is nothing but a barrage of libel, but at the same time it's a Sierra Madre of revelation about the ubiquitous culture and presumptions of media professionalism. *The perimeter of life! Not facing the world!* In Traven's case, these refer to: fighting in the German revolution, escape from custody and flight from a death sentence for treason, itinerant labour at sea and on land, prison and deportation, entanglement in primitive accumulation in Mexico... As opposed, no doubt, to a 'centre' consisting of international networking, commissioning negotiations, long lunches with informants, business class departure lounges... Traven's human inadequacy is further illustrated with an anecdote from the filming of *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, which the writer attended in the guise of 'Hal Croves', 'agent and translator'. 'Diminutive' Croves/Traven was ridiculed non-stop by John Huston for his diffidence and seriousness. At one point 'Croves' annoyed the great director by displaying incompetence at *marlin fishing*, and then compounded the offence when he 'apologised humbly over and over'.

Thus, Traven's flight from identification (along with its political 'rationale') is not just the symptom of a 'misbegotten childhood' complex, it marks him out as an all-round spiritual homunculus. Most damning of all is his failure to 'face the world' like a Frequent Flier, his disinclination to seek centre-stage like a creative entrepreneur, a 'man of action' in the mould of Hemingway, say, or Huston, or... William Wyatt. The producer found it 'no surprise' that Traven 'felt comfortable with the Mexican Indians', for these fellow losers 'were uncompetitive and with them he was unchallenged'.



Film still from John Huston, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, 1948

If competing for personal glory is the criterion of ‘manhood’, and such manhood the measure of all activity, then production itself is nothing; the work is merely a by-product of the struggle for personal affirmation, and insisting on its primacy, as Traven often did, is just an excuse for cowardly failure at self-promotion.⁶ Perhaps this principle explains Wyatt’s inattentive, to say the least, reading of Traven’s actual books.

But it’s more than a matter of misreading. The ‘solution’ to the ‘Traven mystery’ unfolds into a gigantic, almost visionary affirmation of the universal Truth of Public Records, *and the duty of the individual to conform to them.*

⁶ In Wyatt’s book, first published 1980, the ideal of the bold, creative, networking competitor, which today is incessantly drilled into both sexes, appears at the moment of

its genesis in an Action Man ethos which is avowed less often 30 years later, now that the hirsute antics of a Hemingway or Huston may occasionally raise a laugh.

This is what gives the otherwise trivial detective story its frightening contemporary resonance. The following passage from *Rebellion of the Hanged* is quoted by Wyatt as evidence of the author's pathology.

The first thing we must do is attack the registry and burn the papers, all the papers with seals and signatures deeds, birth and death certificates, tax records, everything ... Then nobody will know who he is, what he's called, who was his father, and what his father had ... What do we want with birth certificates?

'Traven', reads the gloss, 'was pleased with his own cleverness at dodging questions, tricking officials and confusing the files, but by abandoning his true identity he compounded his difficulties and kept the wounds of his childhood sore.' Thus, 'with the blind unreasonableness of the obsessed, he hated officials for disbelieving him and for insisting on proof of what he said, when all the time he was telling them lies.' In other words, 'the files', the official records, are always, already, inviolably true: their purpose is to *define* the truth. So much so that any pretence to dispute or deviate from them will inevitably be punished by the return of the repressed 'true identity' in the form of infantile trauma.

By now it will come as no surprise that Wyatt ignores the fierce and consistent contestation throughout all Traven's writing of the *definition of 'truth' and 'lies'* embodied in 'the files'. But a biographer with less of a natural affinity for police work might at least have wondered: does all this still apply when the files make your 'true identity' that of a condemned traitor to 'your' nation-state (or, for that matter, a 'benefit thief')? And in such a case, will 'difficulties' really be 'compounded' more by denial of 'true identity' than by surrender to it? The real argument against institutional 'truth' follows on from these banal points, although it runs quickly out of the reach of journalistic common sense. With furious persistence, Traven shows again and again that public records exist to record *property rights*, in the fullest sense. The property owned, or not owned, or the debts owed, by an individual.

The individual's status as property of a nation state, to be disposed of in war or criminal court. Labour as the property of the employer, whose 'sovereign decision over life and death' in the jungle or at sea only follows this principle as far as its logic leads.

This kind of 'truth' is true insofar as it's in your interest to accept the definition of 'identity' in terms of property. Which is to say, once again, the meaning of 'true identity' varies according to class. If the truth inscribed in the files turns *you* into property, your only options are to compete for some scrap of ownership on the terrible terms given (the near-ubiquitous response in much of the world today, with well-known results for the vast majority of competitors), or to reject altogether the terms and their underlying property-based *definition of truth*, at which point your 'true identity' on record becomes a *lie*.

In practice, however, many of those forced or seduced into at least partially competing discover their recorded 'identity' to be so overwhelmingly disadvantageous that they have to disown it just to stay afloat in the game. This is what the terms 'informal economy' and 'grey market' refer to. These phenomena arise inevitably because the 'truth' of institutional, property-based 'identity' NEVER represents the reality of the system that revolves around it. By foisting onto the individual sole 'responsibility' for what she 'owns' and 'owes', public records systematically occlude the social process that put her in that position. 'A debt is a debt': individual liability for the results of many people's combined actions is unlimited.⁷

⁷ For detailed explication of some of what this mantra means in practice, see various writings by Michael Hudson at <http://michael-hudson.com>.

For this reason, resistance to the 'truth' of the files has nothing whatsoever to do with upholding 'privacy'. 'Civil' liberties are beholden by definition to the database state. Anonymity is necessary not in order to perfect the separation of billions of little monads, but to destroy the shameful fiction of personal agency and responsibility that thwarts perception and practice of human interdependence. *Self-abolition* is the historical mission of the proletariat, wrote Marx; when the 'self' is the one defined by the (national, financial, municipal, educational, medical...) records, the same thing goes for *proletarians*.

Note

A version of this text appeared in *Mute* Vol.2 No.16. The title for this essay is drawn from an open letter to the disappeared Ret Marut, by Bavarian revolutionary comrade Erich Mühsam. Cited by W. Wyatt. For the best account of Marut/Traven's revolutionary activity and writing, taking everything worth

knowing from Wyatt's book while defending political and writerly anonymity, see Ret Marut (another one, but the point is that that's not the point), B. Traven, 'An Anti-Biography', <http://libcom.org/library/b-traven-anti-biography>. The present article was only possible thanks to this one.

Frère Dupont

The Suspended Answer: Or How I Over-egged the Pudding But Still Pulled Out a Plum

An itinerant nihilist-communist found a road in Russia which led into the past. He walked along it until he reached the 1860s. It was Easter and snowflakes were being shaken over the world as though they were the last contents of a great emptying sack. The itinerant's intention was to disrupt the legacy of *Narodnichestvo* by inserting a minor categorical alteration into the coding of all subsequent revolutionary ideas.¹

He thought this intervention would have a good chance of influencing Russians to take a different path towards communism. 'It would only need to be a small change,' he argued, 'a subtle suggestion that could be introduced into nascent revolutionary consciousness and which would naturally increase in its effect as the moment of the Russian crisis approached.'

Evidently, the branching bush the ideas generated during the post-Chernyshevsky period, as constituted by the resounding question, 'What is to be done?' did have an enormous categorical significance in the early decades of the Twentieth Century (which could not have been anticipated in their naive formulation in 1863), so it was reasonable to assume, or so he then thought, that the 1860s had to be the ideal moment to introduce a nihilist-communist proviso.²

¹ *Narodnichestvo* was a radical populist ideology in late 19th century Russia whose proponents, mainly middle class intellectuals, believed in the emancipation of the peasants. These 'Narodniks' were known for both 'going to the people' and living in peasant communities as well as – during the suppression of the movement – terrorist activity and 'propaganda by the deed'. They were influential upon later

socialist and communist revolutionaries in Russia. [Ed. note].

² Nikolai Chernyshevsky was a radical socialist (in)famous for his 1862 novel *What is to be Done?*, prison penned prose that advocated ascetic militancy and was influential on Lenin and many other later generations of revolutionaries [Ed. note].

‘If I could step on the butterfly of Leninism at the point of its emergence, and before it has even dried its wings. If, far out in deep space, I could heat with lasers one side of the asteroid of Bolshevism that is hurtling towards us, and cause it to slightly deviate from the course of its predicted impact on earth, then might not this in itself establish the ground and possibility for another communism?’

To this purpose, he invited the people of the next village to assemble together and listen to his warning. It is not recorded what he said to them, but he was not a natural public speaker and anyway, the message was too complex to be conveyed under those circumstances. From out of the silence which greeted his words, a voice called out, ‘I have a question for you.’ Please, speak freely, said the nihilist-communist, little suspecting that another nihilist-communist had taken the same road back and had arrived at a neighbouring village in the same moment and with the same intention. However, this earlier nihilist-communist, who chose then not to reveal his purpose, had already given up on his quest and now lived a simple peasant life.

His question to the first nihilist-communist was as convoluted as had been the other’s message to the villagers:

Comrade, if as you say, communism is the conscious suppression of waged labour by the proletariat. And, if as you also say, there is some other malignancy in history, aside from the commodity form, which we will then have to confront in our engagement with electrification subsequent to the abolition of waged labour. And, if as you say wherever this other malignancy appears it takes the form of a materialised sequence of irrevocable commands issued from the past to lived relations now. Then, might we not also encounter in our relentless struggle yet another obstacle, which we might then call a third malignancy?

‘I am not sure what you are referring to,’ replied the first nihilist-communist, who did not suspect the other’s identity and was surprised and pleased by the question. He wished not to appear

before the assembly as an overbearing know-it-all, and eagerly sought out every opportunity to facilitate active involvement in communist theory:

We are all familiar with the first problem which is the wage relation and we are becoming acquainted with the second problem, which is state power. But would you be so kind to tell us more about what this third problem might be?

'It is the unavoidable weariness of life lived according to a fixed purpose,' replied the man from the crowd, 'what is communism but work by another name? How tiring it is to wake up each morning, and realise that we have to implement our beliefs. What is the point in making reality conform to our idea of what it should be and then, every day, finding a new break, a new rip, a new puncture in the fabric of our project? Realising an ideal is fine for a day or two. In our early and clamorous enthusiasm we will inscribe our principles onto a banner. We shall hold impassioned meetings and ardently announce our resolutions. But later, only a few days later, all these slogans and principles will have already become a toilsome burden to us. Why should we try and live what we believe? Why seek to suppress work as an external imposition, only to realise it again as a self-producing ideal?'

The meeting reverberated with his question for a short while, and then became quiet again. And the first nihilist-communist, he too became quiet. He nodded to the man in the crowd, turned away and began to think out his honest response, not wishing to do the question an injustice. Whilst he thought, the crowd first became restive and then quietly went back to their everyday lives. The day found its end and then another began. As the first light of day spread across the fields, the first nihilist-communist remained fixed in his place, seemingly caught up in the problem that had been presented to him. In the village, the cocks crowed. A man walked beside his horse to the field. The smoke of morning drifted from the huts and the icy village track lapsed into a melting mire.

And Father Frost dressed the good stepdaughter in a blue sarafan which was ornamented in silver and pearls. And the proud and well-dressed merchant became the victim of black crows with iron beaks. And a dense forest, full of crows, grew so thickly from a comb thrown upon the ground that the witch Baba Yaga could no longer pursue the orphans. And the forty vagina's intended for Tsar Nikita's forty daughters flew from the basket containing them into a birch tree and could not be enticed to return. And the orphans did return from the forest to their father, armed with accusations and mystified questions. And the rich brother discovered the mystery of the gold, the Bogotir and a lifetime of misery from underneath a single stone.

And the nightingale predicted that Ivan, the merchant's son, would become Ivan, the king's son and that his own father would serve him as a simple servant. And the years went by. And the nightingale sometimes sang, and sometimes did not. And the nihilist-communist remained, suspended within his reply. And the fatal moment fast approached when everything that belonged to the eternal would then came to an end. But even so, or so it seemed, the seasons turned as if this would never happen. Perhaps it never would. The mud track froze and the mud track melted. And smoke curled up from the huts. And the time came closer, or it was deferred. It seemed he had not done enough. Or, had he?

Suzanne Goldenberg

Material Poems and Drawings

241

Nickel Bag

Colombian nickel bag
shoved up her ass
she does that dance
nauseous and sweaty
it's the only time
the light comes back
in her eyes
stale dumb hoody
in 90 degree dust
her twin masks
the ghost world
the amulet
the squint
a milky amnesia of midols
she doesn't stop
throwing up
I'm sorry's

Cleaning

Cleaning's over rated
and everyone knows it
a pen and its cap
a sock and its mate
It's all become so predictable
but when the stripes
meet the solids
and the solids the
plaids
only then can
we understand
Order

Practice

straight line
crooked line
straight line
Repeat
practice makes perfect
makes practice
obsolete

Rhubarb Pie

spit up
the rhubarb pie
fish food
for the net-fed
friends
a smell of
mishap
just a small mishap
Cataclysmic slip up
Could mean be
the end
of us
all

S&S

Simone and Susan
those skinny jews
thin
with worry
regurgitating
words
faster
than
butter

Felix

I apologize
I'm sorry
Little things bother me
like hot pink walls
in subway cars
Macy's big shoes
Bigstore
allover sale wallpaper
plastered head to toe
in Grand Central.
and your fruit stand
I'm sorry to have to tell you this
but it's the last time
I mean
I want to support you
No walls or floor or store to speak of
just a shitty umbrella over
a shitty pyramid
of milk crates
with the fading logo
of a has-been bank
I mean
it's my kind of commerce
but let's face it
your oranges are rotten
your persimmons never ripe
And then there's Felix
who has to stand there
handless
trapped inside
a sandwich board
saying
(Please can you help me
with any spare change

I am raising money to buy myself hands)
Stuck on the platform of the 1 train
in Times Square
just to beg for the
pity I mean
generosity
of strangers
so he can buy himself limbs
(To work for a living?)
Oh and let me guess
now we're pretending
to be civilized
by putting a European tone
in the subway sound system
you
have
got
to be
kidding
me
I still can't hear a thing

Balls

Today I found a bottle of hot sauce in the bathroom
poised between the toilet and the magazine rack
I ran to my note book in despair and
carefully tying my pen to the
spiraling rings
(a strategy made famous by mothers
to keep children's mittens
from separating
and also clerks
to protect their plumes
from compulsive thieves
like me)
But now here I am
both clerk and thief
and karma's got me
by the balls

Broadway is burning

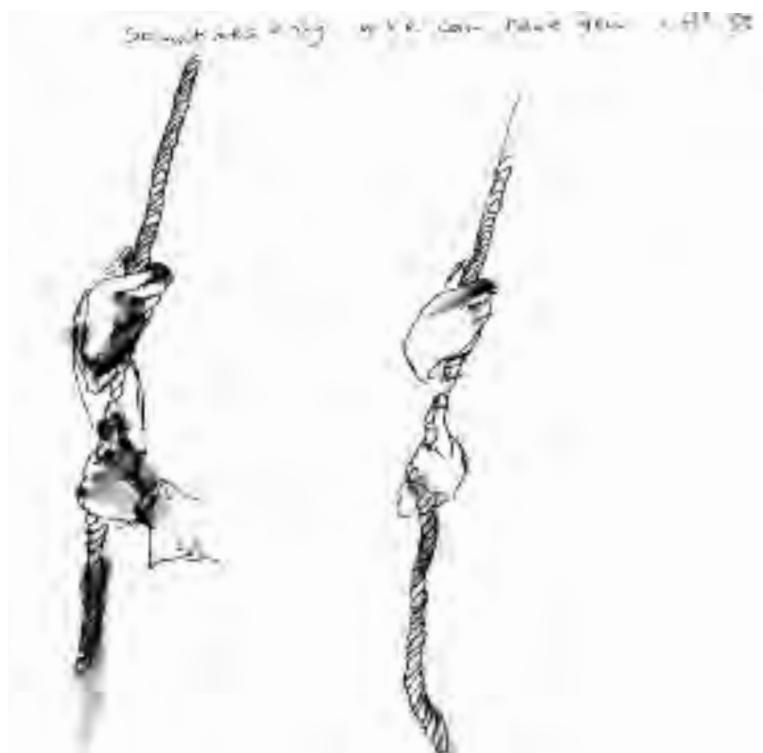
Broadway is burning
Our calcetinas are on fire
It looks like a riot
a sign of the times
Plus/just yesterday
I saw two people
walking the city streets in their bedroom slippers
padding down second avenue
like the corridor of a mental hospital
They must have forgotten to remember to
distinguish
by their costume
to show
that they know
how to separate
the inside
from the outside
As for me
garbage bags in blazes
citizens in slippers
the more the outside
looks like my inside
the more at home I feel
with my living room in flames
and my head on fire













Catherine Wagner

My New Job

I am Invested in
by a Huge Fund
Heavy highquality
furniture
Sense of heavy
Addiction glossy pleasance

I was lying Down on a yoga mat
My bones
basketing air Barely draped in
skin
the basket Effulged by local
Air Highquality scented
humid air
to support My orchid Skin

Suffuged in this Air
expense I nearly
floated Who was my Body

I am comfortable I am
comfortable Flying my spirit

On a long leash
She is in the wind
I am in the belle
belle jar
shellacked and brittle
begins to ding

How can I From inside this comfort

Represent Hope to

No no

I am Too tempted

To think I Deserve it
 Rigidly and with effort

know my privilege

I know my fluorescent doorway

A rectangle Among the ceiling tiles

Ordinary flecked coated 1) foam rectangles

and one hard white light regularly rubbed

2) glass rectangle

these are my choices

the

 ceiling tile I would tear
in behind the

 Ugly lattice to the Duct area

 Unscrew the grille Smallen myself

Into the dark cold Square pipe

 To share My cold What is in

 My basket Bone-basket

 With the other breathers/Workers

Or through the fluorescent door

Means giving up On going behind
the lattice.

All that's allowed Through the flow light

Is what Is shined upon

The light bends looking at my Skin
and hair and green blouse

When I concentrate The light bending
All at once Hooks my outsides

Hooks them into itself

Now I am
absent that

I am not / shined upon

very small dusty

lizardlike a toad a turd

on a tabletop corner

And the outside of that is hooked away

wow my parents

hooked away People

on the street skin and clothing

hung on hangers

from electric wires

blooming and twisting swells of breeze

leave behind on the street

a fair weather

an easy weather

walk-through

I think I'm better than the walk-throughs

because something is left of me

that's what I think I must

be wrong to think so

Would you like to Eat at my house

Fill up your Walk-through

You drive through Fill it up with

tea and sheets

water from the toilet

These could be your eyebrows

[crayons]

these could be your knees, these coasters

What could be your inside?

Paper wadded paper

It says something

What about Something sticky

For your mouth Honey

Then we will read you For dinner

In my transitional housing [dirt ball toad]

I picked myself apart With a fork

Connected a wire Where my belly was

Coiled up the plug

The prongs poke hurt

This is the part Light plugs

into My/The outside plugs

into To light up

The shine is from unshiny

sewn in place with the little

Light hooks Made a case for me

Visible

so I retaliated

Against the hooks

I was trying My lizard turd
 was trying to join the other

Mud

my thrashing harnessed
 motored
 made the light

Meanwhile My toad
 absorbed
 pollution

from the walkthroughs High empty
 thoughts Funneled backchannel

Won't you be mine [mind] Be my thought
 softening the rockmud

I will reorient now I will claymation
 That is a scary Gingerbready

 mud man
 walking You can't catch me hole for
 Your thoughts
 tunneled invisible Unreflecting
 unrepresenter
 Not wrapped

The Sun is here Also later and at
the same time the sun burned
up and we revolved

around it dirt rock

warm dirt rock

in the dark of coursing
around the dark

I have made myself the center of

the galaxy

I am very important to myself

must lose this

visibility

The shine is off

perspect while kicking

Where do you think they get the lights from?

Burn it up, burn up all the fuel
into furious dirt

Nematodes
don't need light

When I am in a room with forest
It is not that myself comes home to myself

Selva oscura, ya

Obscurity of self

I considered long and seriously before

I was bornt

I stood on the street

With the hookers

Who were selling

Disappear into a hole

Into Mama

but come back out.

Go in, boys.

Go in and stay there.

Note

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Amy De'Ath

'Go in boys. Go in and stay there.'

Feminist Poetry and Reading Dialectically

Catherine Wagner's poem 'My New Job' is an example of the kind of ongoing and recursive form that Christopher Nealon and Sianne Ngai have characterised in recent discussions of aesthetic works that reference their own textual and rhetorical character in an effort to think the relation between matter as an objective thing and the abstract structures of social organisation.¹ Speaking of minor affects and politically ambiguous feelings in modern culture, Ngai has also linked this aesthetic tendency to 'the confusion between the subjective status and objective status of feeling in general', one which is 'central to the philosophy of aesthetics.'² Using a method of 'reading dialectically' proposed by the Marxist literary critic Carolyn Lesjak, I want to suggest that we can read this poem, and many others like it, as an exposure of the relationship between lived experience and structure that not only develops as a politics of antagonism within the poem, but depends on poetry's ability to bring into tension the resistant powers of affective rhetoric, and objective reference to the world of matter; a tension that in 'My New Job' functions as a strategy of refusal that may open the ground for more radical feminist and anti-racist forms of thought.

¹ See Nealon's discussion of Claudia Rankine's 'Don't Let Me Be Lonely' and Kevin Davies' 'The Golden Age of Paraphernalia', in Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*, Harvard University Press, 2011, pp.140-166; and Ngai's critique, in *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany, Interesting*, of a number of contemporary patterns: the subject's increasingly despecified relation to work in post-Fordist economies, the thoroughly-saturated

commercial culture and 'aestheticization of life' (p.20) that accompanies this shift (and its oppositional relation to the autonomy of art), and the pervasiveness of 'weak or trivial aesthetic categories' (p.21) and what this means for the longstanding discussion of art's truth-content and commodity status. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Cute, Zany, Interesting*, Harvard UP, 2012.

² Ngai, pp.22-24.

The speaking subject of 'My New Job' is implicitly gendered, raced and classed, as a few lines from the poem's opening section tell us:

I was lying Down on a yoga mat
 My bones
 basketing air Barely draped in
 skin
 the basket Effulged by local
 Air Highquality scented
 humid air
 to support My orchid Skin³

Wagner's use of capitals in this section make for a theatrical and deliberately goofy slippage: the word 'Down' is capitalised so that the preceding words, 'I was lying', may be read as a single utterance, and the word, 'Highquality' appears incorrectly compounded and capitalised like so much sales-speak. In this context, the speaker's reference to her own 'orchid Skin' suggests an expensive whiteness tinged with self-loathing.

But it is through these simultaneously melancholic observations and their formal arrangement that the poem is able to comment on the relation of the increasingly conflated structural forces of state and global capital to unformed and unstructured – yet still palpably felt – affective states dispersed or collected across the ostensibly 'public' realm of the social, and within the pockets of the most intimate spheres of personal life; particularly in those instances where the location, origin, and direction of a specific feeling is unclear. The following section should give a sense of Wagner's self-deprecating humour and enjoyably recognisable allusions to office life; but perhaps more importantly, this excerpt helps to indicate the formal properties of the poem – its spaces, unfinished clauses, repetitions, deliberate trip-ups, and crucially, its sustained duration – which I want to suggest are some of Wagner's most forceful and precise tools of critique. For these reasons, it is worth quoting at length:

³ Catherine Wagner, *My New Job*, Albany, NY: Fence, 2011, p.107.

How can I From inside this
comfort

Represent Hope to

No no

I am Too tempted

To think I Deserve it
Rigidly and with effort

know my privilege

I know my fluorescent doorway

A rectangle Among the ceiling tiles

Ordinary flecked coated 1) foam
rectangles

And one hard white light regularly
rubbled

2) glass rectangle

these are my choices
the

ceiling tile I would tear
in behind the
Ugly lattice to the Duct area
Unscrew the grille Smallen myself
Into the dark cold Square pipe
To share My cold What is in

My basket Bone-basket
 With the other
 breathers/Workers⁴

In this section, content driven descriptions of bodily movements exist in dynamic relation with the poem's linguistic and grammatical blockages: 'How can I From inside this comfort', or 'Rigidly and with effort', and 'Smaller myself / Into the dark cold Square pipe' all represent situations in which the 'passive' speaker is impacted upon by the outside world, where the movement forced is not so much an imposition as a nightmare in which the subject pushed around by the world of capitalist objects is also burdened with the guilt and shame of being in the way in the first place. The familiar abusive relationship is perhaps most precisely captured here in what we might term a prosody of affect; in the spatial and temporal dissonances of Wagner's distorted syntactical units, temporally confused grammar, and self-consciously halting rhythms. As such, the poem is laborious, and mimetic of the virtuosic labour of a particular type of precarious post-Fordist worker – the knowledge-worker autonomous Marxism would designate as a member of the 'cognitariat'⁵ – just as it links this worker, by inscription, to an emotional topography that, in a moment of *not quite* self-recognition, belongs to a middle-class, white, bourgeois subject.

⁴ Wagner, p.256 in this volume.

⁵ The autonomist Marxist scholarship that has emerged out of the Italian Operaist movement of the 1960s and 1970s includes the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in addition to Paolo Virno, Mario Tronti, and Franco Berardi, among others. Their thought has become influential in North America as a mode of response to what has been called the precarisation of work: the global reorganisation of labour and the increasingly abstract, communicative, 'subjective' nature of work in post-Fordist economies.

The general direction of this work has also been criticised by Silvia Federici and others for its Eurocentrism and its failure to acknowledge the gendered character of much affective labour. See Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, New York, NY: Penguin, 2005, Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, <http://libcom.org/library/grammar-multitude-paolo-virno>, and Silvia Federici, 'Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint', <http://inthemiddleofthewind.wordpress.com/precarioust-labor-a-feminist-viewpoint/>

A confession that 'I am Too tempted / To think I Deserve it' is followed by the effort to 'know my privilege'; and it is partly as a result of the poem's fragmented spatial arrangement, and the robotic rhythm to which each isolated phrase passes by, that it is possible to see how this language suggests the paralysis caused by a moralising discourse of privilege co-opted by neoliberalism. Blocked agency in the poem mutates, instead, into a perverse and abject intimacy with the ceiling tiles, whose material properties ('Ordinary flecked coated') are seemingly the speaker's fault: 'These are my choices'. In this way, 'My New Job' enacts a form of critique both material and abstract, cognitive and conative. A poem like this can easily be read as a poetic manifestation of what Lauren Berlant has called 'cruel optimism'. Building on her earlier notion of intimate publics, Berlant's concept provides a framework through which to read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to highlight the collective aspects of certain modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival in a time of 'crisis ordinariness'.⁶ *Cruel Optimism* aims to conceive of a contemporary moment from within that moment, claiming that 'the present is perceived, first, affectively.'⁷

While we might keep in mind the particular temporalities outlined in Berlant's project, both in terms of the immediacy of an affective register of perception, and as a suspended, ongoing present within the bounds of everyday life, we should also consider how Wagner's lamentation of such a life, and of the precarious post-Fordist worker required as its subject, could be a necessary extremity in the face of cruel optimism. 'My New Job' presents a form of antagonism that seeks to reject the feminised ontological categories of 'survival' and 'adjustment', and seems to desire something else, that is, on the nervous edge between compliance and resentment there is a chance that everything holding the situation of the poem together will be (at least figuratively) abolished.

⁶ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, p.3. ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.3.

With this in mind I hope to suggest, via Lesjak's method of 'reading dialectically', that there is a politics to how we read poetry that is crucial to the development of a Marxist-Feminist literary practice. Developing such a practice is not only necessary in light of the critical turn, in some corners, towards the relationship between poetry and political economy, if that turn is to have fidelity to a revolution that is not sexist; but perhaps more importantly, a Marxist-Feminist literary and poetic practice holds the potential to develop in meaningful solidarity – and sometimes in convergence – with other minority struggles and epistemologies, including black feminist politics, indigenous politics, queer politics, and even the mercurial form of black radical politics put forth by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in their recent book, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*.

In 'Reading Dialectically', Lesjak defends Marxist literary criticism against the various types of surface reading that have emerged in the context of a conservative-liberal 'return to literature' in academic literary studies in the twenty-first century:

The impulse to be affirmative, to talk about what texts do rather than what they don't do, occludes the negation upon which such affirmation is based – [...] the ontological assumptions structuring what appears 'in the text' – but unlike a dialectical reading, offers no way of actually registering or thinking the occlusion that structures the surfaces being privileged.⁸

⁸ Carolyn Lesjak, 'Reading Dialectically', *Criticism* 55:2, Spring 2013, p.247.

Lesjak contends that, after the heady theory days of the 1960s-1990s, the smallness of new historical claims sends literary scholarship into comfortable retreat as 'middle-level research', a position occupied without irony or chagrin by the non-heroic critic whose aim is not to master the text but to appreciate it.⁹ Lesjak's point, however, is not to dismiss the relevance of a text's surface, but to think about how 'notions of surface and depth can be seen in productive tension or unease with each other',¹⁰ and in this regard her methodology provides a particularly salient way to read contemporary poetry and its historicity.

Read on one level, 'My New Job' epitomises the cynical reason and ironic detachment of a post-ideological world, as it invites us to fetishise its textual qualities, to immediately grasp its self-flagellating disillusionment, to dwell mournfully in the pauses between each phrasal expression of capitalist complicity, and in short, to be surface readers. But perhaps, thanks to its less frequent moments of ardent sincerity – moments which respond to the performative helplessness of much of the poem – 'My New Job' not only also invites a dialectical reading, but attempts to read *itself* dialectically. Insofar as it foregrounds the untruth of its own surface in order to theatrically stage the disavowal Lesjak attributes to surface readings, we could read this poem too as a rejection of surface reading and its accompanying benign, 'objective', non-heroic critic, because 'My New Job' literally renders this type of critic useless. The following lines, for example, document a painful relation between *constituted* subject and *constitutive* conditions:

When I concentrate The
light bending
All at once Hooks my outsides

⁹ Ibid., p.245.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.248.

Hooks them into itself

Now I am
absent that

I am not / shined upon¹¹

In this instance, the 'light bending' is the terrifying agent that hooks the speaker's outsides into its own absent structure: crucially, we can only understand the significance of 'light bending' as an analogy for capital here if we read these lines dialectically, in the context of the poem's spatial and temporal dissonances, and with the 'leap of faith' made necessary – by the inhuman quantifications, ruptures and contradictions of high finance and cognitive labour – to comprehend the constitutive abstraction of globalised capital.¹²

This turning inside out of ideology is not the same as the fetishism that, in Slavoj Žižek's analysis, we cling to in order to cancel the full impact of reality: rather, 'My New Job' is dialectical in the sense that, with a metaphor at once as potent and untouchable as 'light bending', it forces us to see the visible structure's 'aching gaps' (as Lesjak, after Eve Sedgwick, calls them), at the same time as it suggests the presence of an employed subject who is positively determined by capital yet painfully aware that her 'presence' depends solely on her production of surplus value. And so it is through a dialectical reading of 'My New Job' that I want to suggest that the poem's resignation to the complete saturation of life by capital is, precisely at the point of saturation, an exposure of capital's limit and a negation: by foregrounding the absence of any subject not determined by capital and its gendered logics, the poem desires to call forth a negated,

¹¹ Wagner, p.109.

¹² For a nuanced account of the ability of artistic practice to reflect on the instability

of the dialectic of abstraction and concretion see Sven Lütticken, 'Inside Abstraction', *e-flux*, October 2012, p.38, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/inside-abstraction/>

contradictory subject into political action, and in this way carries a feminist utopian impulse and a rejection of the state of 'crisis ordinariness'. For a poem that makes frequent and depressed allusions to the normative codes of heterosexual and gendered experience under capital, we can read no small amount of joy and affirmation in its indignant anticlimax; an address to the boys that they can keep their Oedipus complex (and with these lines the poem finishes):

Disappear into a hole

Into Mama

but come back out.

Go in boys.

Go in and stay there.¹³

Utopias aside, it is worth noting that we could make an argument for a surface reading of this poem if we read it as a kind of testimony; one that contributes to the generation of social belief in the obviousness of dominant reality, an obviousness that, as Angela McRobbie and others have argued in a Western context, is lost to working class and lower-middle class women when verbal slurs and shaming tactics, often projected in the name of so-called self-improvement, actually function as forms of classed and post-feminist symbolic violence that are then absorbed and embodied by those to whom they are addressed (McRobbie points to the grateful and humbled subjects of make-over programmes such as *What Not to Wear* and *Ten Years Younger* as examples of this).¹⁴

¹³ Wagner, p.104.

The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change, London: SAGE, 2009, pp.124-149.

¹⁴ Angela McRobbie, 'What Not to Wear: Post-Feminist Symbolic Violence' in

But if poetry's role is reduced to stating the obvious, the reader engaged in ideological critique is arguably left in a kind of aporetic sinkhole. This might not be so bad if it did not also entail an obscuring of even the imagined possibility of a subject capable of opposing capitalism. However, Lesjak's argument is also that,

what is needed is a better way of reading surfaces as perverse rather than as obvious, as never identical to themselves in their 'thereness', and always found within and constitutive of complex spatial relations, both seen and not seen, deep and lateral, material and figural.¹⁵

This is a case of 'seeing what we know' rather than 'knowing what we see' – 'because relations, after all, cannot be seen in any solely literal sense.'¹⁶ Reading 'My New Job' dialectically, then, also means seeing what the poem can only sense, despite its reflexive attempt at self-consciousness; which is that the depressed and anxious speaker is a subject whose 'privilege' and 'comfort' is dependent on the structural subordination of groups of people – including entire populations – for whom the experience of 'precarity' is not only more intensely immiserating but constitutively (and perhaps ontologically) different. Drawing on Frank B. Wilderson's writing on the prison slave, Fred Moten's description of blackness in America as a site 'that generates no categories for the chromosome of history [...] an experience without analogue – a past without a heritage' is tied to an image of the black subject as the 'subprime debtor', who is always in the red, always in the negative.¹⁷ Yet this negativity is the basis of Moten's appeal to the undercommons of an already integrated totality, a 'social and historical paraontology' that takes place in what Moten and Harney, in *The Undercommons*, call 'the surround': a space that defends itself

¹⁵ 'Reading Dialectically', op. cit., p.251.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Fred Moten, 'The Subprime and the beautiful', *African Identities* 11:2, July 2013, pp.239-240.

against the settler's armed incursion and against politics and the law, at the same time as it calls for a revolution without a singular subject.¹⁸ Precarity is thus also a powerful threat, and in this complex and historical sense is fundamentally (qualitatively) distinct from and still entangled with the types of precarity that have only recently proliferated under post-Fordism for more privileged and usually white subjects, and cannot simply be figured on a spectrum of intensity.¹⁹

It is not that 'My New Job' provides this analogue knowledge or thought for us, but that it is inevitably situated within its indeterminacies and in/visibility. As such, reading the poem's prosody of affect as something more than itself is also the dialectical ability to 'think ourselves and the world spatially.'²⁰ It is a different way of thinking about subjectivity, where the gaps in the poem are no longer read simply as the speaker's introspective feelings of dislocation and lack, but as a structural absence that is not one: that is in fact the history of racial capitalism. As Chris Chen has noted, it is 'through race [that] black chattel slavery in the United States constituted "free" labour as white, and whiteness as unenslaveability and unalienable property', yet (to paraphrase Chen): 'race' is not a property or attribute of identities or groups, but an array of ascriptive procedures that structure social life, and must be conceived of as a structural coercion rather than a cultural particularity or deviation from socio-political norms:²¹

¹⁸ Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013, pp.17-43.

¹⁹ As Angela Mitropoulos has noted, the grammar at work in discussions of what has recently become known as 'precarity' shows us that the replacement of 'precariousness' with this word also marks the transition from adjective to noun, condition to name, since, "capital is perpetually in crisis. Capital is precarious,

and normally so", and it is possible – since the rise of the relatively-empowered 'cognitariat' – to speculate as to why this has only recently come to be an assumption in scholarly discourse ('Precari-Us?' *Mute* Vol.1, #29, 2005, pp.88-92.

²⁰ 'Reading Dialectically', op. cit., p.260.

²¹ Chris Chen, 'The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism', *Endnotes* 3, September 2013, pp.203-5.

If race is thus [unhelpfully] understood in terms of difference rather than domination, then anti-racist practice will require the affirmation of stigmatised identities rather than their abolition as indices of structural subordination. Formulating an abolitionist anti-racism would require imagining the end of 'race' as a hierarchical assignment, rather than a denial of the political salience of cultural identities. 'Race' here names a relation of subordination.²²

If the affirmation of stigmatised identities would – as Chen's essay implies – involve some kind of evasiveness or covering over that would precisely play to capitalism's requirements, it is of course the same colonial project of obscurity and willed amnesia that has always been underway, and one that is never finished as long as capital continues to find new routes of racist exploitation and expropriation. It is thus no accident that this essay, which is ostensibly centered on a specifically white experience in its claim that poetry can critique gendered post-Fordist labour, arrives at a question of race. As Jack Halberstam asserts in his preface to *The Undercommons*, 'racial hierarchies are not rational and ordered, they are chaotic and nonsensical and must be opposed by precisely all those who benefit in any way from them.'²³ Seeing what we know is a question of seeing this fact; seeing that the poem, in its nervous complicity, on some level knows it too. Moten, in problematically gendered yet racially-politicised language, puts it this way: 'I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?'²⁴

²² Ibid., p.206.

²³ Jack Halberstam, 'The Wild Beyond', in *The Undercommons*, op. cit., p.10.

²⁴ Ibid., p.140-141.

Indeed, the conditions of possibility for the existence of the poem 'My New Job' are the forms of exploitation specific to gendered and racialised capital. And it is the poem's feminism met with a dialectical reading that give the lie to the smiling surfaces and services of post-Fordist immaterial and affective labour of globalised economies, which – as we know, despite the poem's not telling us – are based on an obscuring of race relations even in broad daylight (think of the paradoxical hyper-visibility of 'the ostensible racial threats posed [to the U.S.] by black wageless life, Latino immigrant labour, and "Islamic terrorism").²⁵ To read this poem dialectically should be to suggest that we not repeat the obscuring gesture; it should require that 'we' – the collective pronoun becomes intensely suspect here – reject readings that re-entrench a universalising view of the world from the position of the white bourgeois subject, whose contemporary feelings are illuminated against the backdrop of an abstract and negative impression of anonymous 'surplus populations', figured only as the present iteration of a history of colonial violence after globalisation. It should be to suggest that we not forcibly re-inscribe the very patterning of structural violence that theorists of Afro-Pessimism have over the last decade argued is 'the formative relation' that positions the slave, and in turn constitutes the central ontological *absence* of black existence.²⁶ That is, to read this poem dialectically is necessarily to conclude that we should also be reading different poems. Not, recalling Moten's statement, in the hope of retroactively appending some 'analog' to the under-philosophised 'experience' of blackness in America, but in order to think otherness through aesthetic experience,

²⁵ 'The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality...', op. cit., p.203.

²⁶ 'In America, the history of capital is the history of black subjection', begins a recent, anonymously-authored essay, 'Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death', an examination of the emergent discourse of Afro-Pessimism,

which posits black existence as an 'ontological absence', arguing that blackness has displaced the form of the slave along a continuum whereby 'emancipation does not signify any substantial break with the content of slavery.' Mute, 5 June 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wanderings-slave-black-life-and-social-death>

perhaps (among other things) so as to better – or just more intimately – understand the ascriptive procedures and structural coercions that produce race. Such a capacity within aesthetics has been proposed in various guises, from Mikhail Bakhtin's theorising of the link between 'sympathetic co-experiencing' of an aesthetic event and the production of knowledge,²⁷ to Marina Vishmidt's suggestion, springing from Adorno, that 'the rational core of aesthetics is that it makes us experience, not just apprehend, the radical unknowability of the world and ourselves and the way this unknowability poses a claim on reality as contingent and thus transformable.'²⁸ Given Adorno's insistence that the need to conceptualise means that, under capital, true otherness cannot be thought because it is subsumed by the concept despite the antagonism posed by its non-identity, the point is worth stating explicitly: a dialectical reading of surface and depth necessarily concludes with an injunction to read 'other' poems because a thoroughly historical materialist critique must move from the whole to the part, from the totality to its constitutive elements.

This is not to say we are reading the wrong poem when we read 'My New Job' as a critique of the precarity of the post-Fordist worker. Indeed, we could read the most disconcerting moments of the poem as the site of a Marxist-Feminist politics: the movement from emotional acquiescence to affective and immaterial labour, to non-compliance with 'feminine' modes of survival and adjustment, to a surreptitiously joyful and openly confrontational anti-male finale. But the ramifications of a dialectical reading – which deflects us from the poem at hand and sends us elsewhere – would perhaps helpfully extend and deepen Marxist-Feminism's attempts to think about race on a global scale.

²⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 1990, p.86-7.

²⁸ Marina Vishmidt, 'Maintenance of What: On Reproduction in an Extra-Systemic Sense.' (presentation, Marxist Literary Group: Institute on Culture and Society, Banff, AB, June 13-18, 2014).

It is highly significant then, that the most immediate and affective dimensions of 'My New Job' are also the means by which the poem exposes the perversity of its surface. I want to end on a suggestion that the affects of the poem's surface also belong to its internal dynamic – the poem 'hooks them into itself', to use Wagner's words – to create a politics of antagonism that we can think of in terms of a claim made by Vishmidt for feminist maintenance art. Vishmidt has argued that thinking about art in terms of the production of abstract labour – that is, any kind of waged work in a capitalist economy, 'the generic social condition of capitalist work' – as opposed to autonomist Marxist conceptions of 'living labour' as an excess or constitutive outside to capital, allows for 'an encounter with the contradictions we perform and reproduce.'²⁹ Wagner's poem suggests the same negative movement in the following lines:

I think I'm better than the walk throughs
because something is left of me

that's what I think I must
be wrong to think so.³⁰

Moten and Harney have underlined how the modern university 'wants to reproduce a labor force that understands itself as not only unnecessary but dangerous to the development of capitalism.'³¹ Since 'My New Job' unnervingly mimes and documents an experience of work, and also assumes the status of labour itself, reading the poem's rhetorical affect as inherent to the antagonism that exists as a structural potentiality, both within the poem and within abstract labour, points to the dialectical negativity of the post-Fordist subject who is conscious of her precarious and gendered relation to capital.

²⁹ Marina Vishmidt, "'To Die and Leave Silk for Capital": Abstract Labour, Art and Reproduction', *Post-Fordism and its Discontents*. Ed. Gal Kim, Maastricht, Netherlands: Jan Van Eyck Academie, 2010, p.317.

³⁰ Wagner, p.110.

³¹ *The Undercommons*, op. cit., p.29.

But a dialectical reading shows this antagonism up as an encounter with a contradiction posed by the non-identical, as that which may be sensed but not articulated by this poem, that is, the experiential realities of the speaker's dependence on the structural subordination of others. By Adorno's assessment, this is dialectics: 'dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint.'³² Crucially, however, the Jamesonian spatial dialectic that Lesjak's rich analysis opens up as a mode of reading both surface and depth offers a way of reading and writing poetry that 'no longer relies on self-reflexivity as the means toward the apprehension of history.'³³ This kind of dialectical poetics might also be a better way to conceive of forms of solidarity with those individuals and groups who are negatively rather than positively determined by capital; the excluded subjects who, in contrast to the bourgeois subject of this poem, are expelled from the production process, and whose experience takes place in the 'aching gaps' left in capitalism's wake.

³² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, New York, NY: Continuum, 2007, p.5.

³³ Lesjak, p.260.

Danny Hayward

By Impossibly Popular Demand

The first line of Bertolt Brecht's poem 'Lob Des Lernen', first included in his adaptation of Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel *The Mother*, is 'Lerne das Einfachste!' ('Learn the basics!'). 'For those/whose time has come', Brecht writes, 'it is never too late!'¹ Brecht did not pause to ask *what* time was coming. He didn't need, and he didn't think that his reader needed, to seek specialist advice, to dial a premium rate number, or to slaughter a goat in order to know *to whom* the time would belong. Brecht did not wring his hands in dejection at the possibility that the time might not come when humanity most needed it; or fret that it might really have always been too late; or publish vainly dejected diary entries about how his work might look to posterity if the people whose time *came* turned out not to be the oppressed of the earth but bourgeois readers convinced that, unfortunately, *things are different now*. Brecht was literally incapable of anticipating any of this, not for the reason that he was too bloody minded or pugnacious to understand that the revolutionary movements of the '30s and '40s would collapse, that they would fail in their uprisings, that they would stagnate in the political and cultural organisations, that they would succumb under the pressures of Stalinisation, but for the nicer reason that he knew perfectly well that for as long as there existed audiences for his work willing to sublimate their moral preferences into ersatz historical knowledge – that is, for so long as there existed bourgeois readerships – it was not probable but certain that things would be essentially the same.

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Gedichte und Lieder*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973, p.21. English approximations here and elsewhere are my own.

Brecht's simplest thing was the 'abc', a triplet that even we, at the very *xyz* of capitalist history, do not have to consider too carefully before we identify it with Bukharin and Preobrazhensky's *The ABC of Communism*, and therefore with the people's theatres, left books clubs, and the Neukölln Karl-Marx-Schule in which Brecht's earliest pedagogical plays were first tested against the reactions of a proletarian audience. None of these remain except as memories: times change, people change, so too do the simplest things. And yet the claim that what Blake called 'Eternity's sun rise' has been jostled out of its orbit by the 'sun that never sets on the empire of the spectacle' may nevertheless remain too precipitous; and most of all where it supports the further idea that Brecht's *das Einfachste* has not 'changed' but has merely disappeared, to be replaced by that conceptual privation for which it is never too late or too soon because *it* is merely the complacent anti-intellectualism of the present status quo.

The *very simplest thing* is in the strongest sense the popularisation of anti-capitalist beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes. In the absence of creditable and autonomous institutions for the carrying out of that popularisation, it is necessary to address the question conceptually rather than sociologically. The premise of what follows is that the *technique* by which complicated thinking is given new form and pith, is compressed and clarified, is provided with its own rhythms and quicknesses, is immensely more complicated than the mostly antecedent task of working out the conceptual detail of what it is that is to be communicated. It is only slack jawed statolatry that imagines the production of complicated theoretical thinking to be the short intellectual prelude to the difficult *practical* work of dissemination, and which fails to see that dissemination is also at every step cognitive and conceptual. Dissemination is different from complicated conceptual thinking not so much in that it is the work of communicating ideas that have been *produced* elsewhere, work which is, in the disciplinarian phrasing of grown-up organisers, *difficult and often unrewarding*, but in the sense that it is carried out by vastly more people, acting in relation not to one single

pasteurised 'audience' but in relation to thousands or even millions of them. It is, or at least it ought to be, complicated conceptual thinking on a different scale.

Like all intellectual distortions that are more than simple *errors*, the misprision of the social task of popularisation gives birth to its own special form of mysticism. The sublime sense of auto-obliviation felt by radicals as they ponder the deeply metaphysical problem of the *correct slogan* is only the conscious content of the deeper and for the most part unconscious acknowledgement that the work of popularising ideas opposed to the present state of things is a work for which no individual slogan will suffice, because the popularisation is not a matter of the single best conceptual simplification but of a thousand tones of voice and a thousand accents and temperaments: of modes of expression more various and more constitutionally unmanageable than those contained in any novel by Joyce or app by Samsung or whoever. This irrational sensation of difficulty, and all of its affective cognates on the lines running from frustration to despair, *displaces* the analysis of the complex social work of simplification, for the simple reason that it is easier to write about an irrational sensation of difficulty (and to dignify it as a species of parlour dialectics) than it is to write speculatively about the dimensions of a task which by its nature outmatches the capacities of any single author.

As ever the issue is in its broadest terms a problem of work. Just as capitalist theories of value assume that the value received by capitalists is equal to their 'contribution', and so effectively attribute to individuals the 'creation' of value which is in fact the work of innumerable people, the aesthetic thinking of bourgeois writers, including those who consider themselves to be opposed to present social relations, perpetually distorts into an aporetic of individual obligation a task whose true domain is collective human existence. The complexity of simplification is constantly annulled and reposed as the simple work of 'understanding' a single complication, along the lines of, 'how do we make our ideas reach the audience which might use them?'

This single complication is the labyrinth in which bourgeois aesthetics and vanguardist revolutionary politics together perform the preparatory workouts for a social insurgency the deferral of which is in part their own responsibility.

When it is treated less stupidly, the complex task of simplification is commonly subjected to at least two further pseudo-solutions. The first takes the form of 'collective' writing and small-group work. Small collectives and groups are more akin to individuals than they are to 'masses', though they are more akin to limited legal entities such as corporations than to persons, and like corporations their status as homogeneous and self-sufficient bodies serves mainly to indemnify their individual members against responsibility for the statements belonging to the collective. That indemnification underwrites the tone of imperturbably strident certitude common to literary and political groupuscules, a tone which is, at the level of literary style, a kind of idealism, and also a wretched malconformation of the real conditions of what Marx would think of as social labour. The second way in which the complex task of simplification is subjected to a pseudo-solution is by means of 'realism', whether novelistic or otherwise. The pluralism of realism is a pseudo-solution to the task of popularisation because it is in the 'realist' curation of different and contradictory social voices that the power of the individual to perform *all* of the intellectual work of society receives its most stirring affirmation, even as the controlling intelligence behind that realism tactfully performs her own effacement from the scene of the drama she directs. Realism is presently the *least* popular form of art, in the most significant sense of that word. The idea that realist artists merely curate and set forth the 'essences' of social division merely substantiates this judgment, since it presupposes that what is essential in the object under consideration is capable of being determined independently of the consciousnesses of the people whose actions will establish its content.

Can we, at least, *understand the problem?* This too is the wrong way of defining the object at hand. Viewed abstractly in these terms, the 'complexity' of the 'problem' can be programmatically disassociated

from what the same specious vocabulary would view as its *solution*. That is to say, the task is complex only in proportion to the complexity of the resources for its negation: the faculty of speech and expression of *everyone* who would be called upon to popularise the attitudes and understandings requisite to a general opposition to capitalist social relations. It is no less absurd to tremble before the extent of this task than it is to prostrate oneself before a census record, unless it is true that every human added to a numerical aggregate is just a rude concatenation of orifices and vacuums, i.e. precisely what capitalist culture detests them for being: what it tries to make of them.

In our current period, in which the future for the majority of people is so uncertain, radicals sometimes attempt to galvanise social resolve by pointing out that this ‘uncertainty’ is only the euphemistic individualisation of the deeper truth that the future will certainly be bad for the classes to which the majority of people belong. Reactionary thinking has an innate bias to uncertainty because it encourages providential and prudential attitudes and is a great stimulus for cowardice; and because the peace of society benefits enormously from all three of these. And yet exactly where radical thinking seems to make its most accomplished departure from the irreducibility of uncertainty, from the margin of error in which both John Maynard Keynes and psephology raise their encampments, that is, exactly where radical thinking approaches most nearly to messianism – in the passionate certitude of its habitual tone of argument, and, where that tone is repudiated, in the obdurate belief that there must necessarily exist the correct and right words to distil into communicable chants, slogans, and verses the complex falsity of contemporary social relations – exactly here radicalism slides back into probabilistic thinking. It does so because, in the last instance, the artifice of rhetorical certitude and the belief in the accessibility of correct and efficacious discursive criticism are nothing more than a kind of complex gamble, a desperate speculation whose idealism (in every sense) is the most formidable block erected against a truer sense of what popularisation must certainly be.

We end up where we began. Simplification has to be understood as an enormously complex *labour* problem. Only by regarding it as a labour problem is it possible to contradict the presently more natural account in which it is not a labour problem but a problem of *logic*. By refusing to treat simplification as a logical problem, we arrest the tendency of thought in which the larger question of *popularisation* comes to appear as nothing but the darkest and most echoless chasm, into which 'correct ideas' are thrown and silently consumed, in a mimicry of the act by which the commodity human labour power is thrown away, daily, in the production of wretchedness and exhaustion. *Learn the basics.*

Note

This text is reproduced from Danny Hayward, *People*, Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2013, with the kind permission of the author.

**Letter to My Unsuspecting,
Peaceable Reader**

Dear unsuspecting, peaceable reader,

the pages you are about to read are an explicit and urgent invitation to violence. You are no doubt as mild as most readers of books, a species of humans headed for extinction precisely because of their meekness, along with the gradual, methodical cultivation of illiteracy successfully managed by the school system under the directives on the 'three I's': English [*Inglese*], Business [*Impresa*], Internet.

Books are not headed for extinction, actually: more of them than ever are written and printed, bookstores overflow with them and sometimes even sell a few. But only the tiniest number are read, and then mostly in secret. With their lovely colourful covers, they are used for the most part as decoration, strewn on tables and shelves and the odd one in the toilet too. Recently an up-and-coming publisher beat the competition by drastically cutting the price of its covers. These contained only blank pages, very useful for notes and other less noble purposes.

We all know that books are written by individuals suffering from acute narcissism – mainly to impress their girlfriends and friends – and that in general only the authors buy a few copies, intending to hand them out here and there. All the other copies are pulped directly, boosting the healthy publishing economy that provides work for papermakers, compositors, typographers, binders, distributors, forwarding agents and booksellers, not to speak of celebrity singers and footballers who hire out their names to appear on the front pages of the papers in place of the author's. (Excluded from this list are the publishers' editors, long since eliminated for their stubborn insistence on publishing intelligent and correspondingly unsaleable books;

now replaced with sales and marketing managers, usually bringing relevant experience from the sanitation or pet food sector.) But then you'll ask me, clueless reader, where do the profits come from to pay so many workers engaged in this lucrative business*? That is no secret either: the money comes from the book-paper recycling industry. After a short stay in the shop, almost all books go back to the publisher and from there to the pulping plant.

Regenerating paper is actually a much more profitable activity than producing it *ex novo*, and it also earns environmental certification and subsidies for leaving forests unmassacred. (That the recycling of paper is highly polluting; that from every standpoint except that of profit it is better to cut trees down and replant them: all this is a groundless insinuation spread by the usual ultra-reactionary enemies of new technologies and globalisation.) And you, unwitting reader, play your smiling part in this mega-fraud, in fact you are its crucial pawn, its reason for being. But you are meek and are not beset by the desire to send for pulping and recycling the papermakers, compositors, typographers, binders, distributors, forwarding agents and booksellers, not to speak of famous singers and footballers. You harbour no homicidal feelings towards them because they give life to your better world, your escape, your lost paradise, your blessed refuge from the misfortunes and ugliness that wound and humiliate you daily. But now, supremely foolish reader, as you continue through this book something will change inside you with each successive line; even your body will slowly be transformed. As they leaf lovingly through the pages, your pale fatty fingers will gradually turn warped and perverse, your eyes will fill with blood, a satanic sneer will deform your face... Stop there, calm down, relax. None of it is true, it was all a joke, I just wrote it to kid you a bit, because deep down you're likeable and well-meaning. But you shouldn't believe blindly in everything you read in books, in fact you should never believe it at all. Books should not be read in order to find something to believe in. So why read them at all then, you ask? I'm not going to tell you, bone idle reader. You'll have to get to that point yourself.

But I see that you're somewhat bewildered, you're having so much trouble that I worry you'll never make it. And I know I have to be gentle with you, because without you what would I be doing? So I'll try to give you a few pointers even though you don't deserve it, witless as you are. First of all, get it clear that the point of reading is not to experience emotions – joy or sadness, melancholy or exhilaration – just as it's idiotic to expect that sort of thing from a picture or a piece of music. People do that most of the time, blissfully toying with pollutants in which they see themselves reflected to reassuring, flattering effect. But the point of an authentic work (a book, a picture, a piece of music) is to make you see differently – or rather, to change your way of seeing and perceiving things and the world, to show you aspects of reality you didn't know about, to shake you for a second out of your usual robotic sonambulism. To wake you up however briefly, giving you the vertigo of something unknown, an affront to the laws and rules by which you live stitched-up and anaesthetised.

I doubt very much that you will really arrive at a new way of seeing, gentle reader. But I hope these pages will give you a sense that behind the language of newspapers and TV, behind the violence of the channelled information that almost always tells a false and deformed story of the world, there are abysses that open up, disclosing hidden and disturbing realities. Just scramble the lines a bit, shift the point of view, refuse *déjà vu*... Of course I don't expect you to contest or refuse the nicely sewn-up, stinking world they offer you, ignoble reader. Others have tried that and ended wretchedly (as this book also records). But others again will always keep trying. So don't trouble yourself: go on getting drunk on your colourful covers, dream as much as you want to; hide out, run cheerfully away under the imbecile grin of the Cavaliers** who promise you more money and more shit from big billboards everywhere. But if by some chance you should happen at some point in your life to feel a sudden, irresistible urge to smash everything, maybe just this once don't hold it in.

Let out the tonnes of unexpressed violence that you've swallowed over the years and sent to your internal pulping plant. Let it explode in a crazy gesture that you'd shudder even to think of right now. Take a good stone, make sure no-one is watching, then throw it with all your strength at – as you prefer – a) the fat face on the billboard; b) the red traffic light; c) the cat on the fence; d) the bank on the corner...

Note

In 1976 Einaudi published *La violenza illustrata*, a 'cut up' novel drawing from newspaper articles, court papers, interrogation transcripts. A narrative centred on the 'here and now' of reports variously covering a forced eviction of squatted houses, bank robberies to finance the antagonist movements, the merciless cynicism of a repetitive and alienating job, and dissident street demonstrations. The text published for the first time here in English translation was written by Balestrini as a preface to the French-language edition of the book (Entremonde, Geneva, 2011) and appeared again the same year in a new Italian edition (DeriveApprodi, Rome). Nonetheless the author asserts the original date of composition was in fact 2001.

Translator's Notes

* *business*. English in original.

** *cavalieri*. The adjective 'cavalier', as in 'recklessly self-satisfied', should not be discounted here; nor should the horsemen of the failed English Royalist apocalypse. But it's also worth noting that Italian media, especially those owned by Silvio Berlusconi, routinely refer to the erstwhile prime minister as *il Cavaliere*. (Or *Cav* for short).

Translation by Neinsager.

Nanni Balestrini is the author of numerous volumes of poetry, including *Blackout* and *Ipcalisse*, and novels such as *Tristano*, *Vogliamo Tutto*, and *La Violenza Illustrata*. His experimental novel, *Tristano*, was published in English translation by Verso in 2014.

Jacob Bard-Rosenberg is a doctoral student working on memory and forgetting in negative dialectical thought at the Department of English and Humanities, Birkbeck College, University of London. His writings can be read at <http://prolapsarian.tumblr.com/>

Sean Bonney's books of poetry include *Happiness: Poems after Rimbaud*, *The Commons*, *Baudelaire* in English and *Document: Poems, Diagrams, Manifestos*. His first prose book, *Letters Against Enchantment* will be published next year. His work has been translated into German, French, Spanish and Icelandic. He lives in abject poverty in Walthamstow, East London, and most of his writing can be read at <http://www.abandonedbuildings.blogspot.co.uk>

Anne Boyer is a poet. Her works include *Anne Boyer's Good Apocalypse* (2006), *Selected Dreams with a Note on Phrenology* (2007), *The Romance of Happy Workers* (2008), *Art is War* (2009), *The 2000s* (2009), *My Common Heart* (2011), and *A Form of Sabotage*, published in translation by the Turkish collective *Kült Neşriyat* in 2013. She is an Assistant Professor of the liberal arts at Kansas City Art Institute. More at <http://anneboyer.tumblr.com>

John Cunningham is a writer and researcher based in London who has published in *Mute*, *Variant* and a variety of other publications including the anthology *Communization and Its Discontents*. He is also a member of the Full Unemployment Cinema collective and participant in various other cultural and political non-ventures that would like to leave the world we must leave.

Amy De'Ath is a poet and a PhD student at Simon Fraser University, where she studies poetry and Marxist-Feminist theory, and works on the Vancouver-based poetics journal *Line*. For several years she worked in London, UK and in 2011 was Poet in Residence at the University of Surrey. Her poetry publications include *Lower Parallel* (Barque Press), *Caribou* (Bad Press), and *Erec & Enide* (Salt). She now lives in Vancouver, Coast Salish Territories.

Frère Dupont is the author of, *Species Being and Other Stories*, Ardent Press, 2007 and, with Le Garçon Dupont, *Nibilist Communism*, Ardent Press, 2009. Some of his writing can be read at <http://editor-horns.blogspot.co.uk/>

Suzanne Goldenberg is a New York based artist. Her materials of choice include pens, thread, scissors, wire, glue and language. She works with refuse and words, stacking them in unexpected compositions. Some of her work can be seen at www.suzannegoldenberg.blogspot.com

Danny Hayward is a complex system of malfunctioning sensors based in London. A book of his poems and essays, *People*, from which the two texts in the present volume were extracted, was published in 2013 by Mountain Press.

Anke Hennig teaches at the Peter Szondi Institute of Comparative Literature at the Freie Universität Berlin and is a Research Fellow in the Collaborative Research Centre 'Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits'. Her recent publications have addressed the chronotology of cinematic fiction, the present-tense novel, and speculative poetics. She is the author of *Sowjetische Kinodramaturgie* (2010) and, in cooperation with Armen Avanesian, co-author of *Präsens. Poetik eines Tempus* (2012) and *Metanoia. Spekulative Ontologie der Sprache* (2014).

Martin Howse is occupied with an investigation of the links between the earth, code and the human psyche, proposing a return to animism within an abuse of language and technology. Project details can be found at <http://1010.co.uk>

Anthony Iles is a writer of criticism, theory and fiction based in London and a member of the *Mute* editorial collective and the cinema club, Full Unemployment Cinema. Initiating the Anguish Language project, he has worked the editors, contributors, designers and publishers to bring the publication to something resembling completion but secretly wishes this work would never cease.

Karolin Meunier is an artist and writer based in Berlin, working with video, text and performance. She is currently member of the feminist film and video distributor Cinenova in London and of *b_books* in Berlin.

Mira Mattar is a writer, contributing editor at *Mute* and *3:AM*, and one third of Monster Emporium Press. She lives in south east London. <http://hermouth.blogspot.co.uk/>

Mattin is a Basque artist working with noise and improvisation. His work seeks to address the social and economic structures of experimental music production through live performance, recordings and writing.

Neinsager languishes in the margin for error.

Pier Paolo Pasolini was a film director, poet, journalist, philosopher, novelist, playwright, newspaper and magazine columnist, actor and painter. He published nineteen books of poems during his lifetime.

Lisa Robertson is a Canadian poet living in France. Enitharmon Press has just published a new edition of *The Men*, in the UK, and in Canada, Coach House is bringing out her new book, *Cinema of the Present*. Her books of essays are *Nilling*, and *Occasional Works* and *Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*. She is a core tutor at Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.

Marina Vishmidt writes with herself and others on topics relating to art, value and negativity. She generally lives in London.

Catherine Wagner's collections of poems include *Nervous Device* (2012), *My New Job* (2009), *Macular Hole* (2004), *Miss America* (2001); and a dozen chapbooks, including *Imitating* (Leaf Press, 2004). Her poems and essays have appeared in *Abraham Lincoln*, *Lana Turner*, *New American Writing, 1913*, *How2*, *Cambridge Literary Review*, *Soft Targets*, *Action, Yes*, and other magazines.

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