

# CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

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Luke Roberts

## That Death, That Decade: Sean Bonney

You can easily understand that everything is jumbled up in my head. Nevertheless, in order to cooperate as much as possible with your investigation, I will risk sending you the few reflections that come particularly to mind.

*Léo Meillet*<sup>1</sup>

IF THE DUST EVER SETTLES, Sean Bonney—his person, his poems—will be right there, head tilted, deadly serious, ready to cackle in delight and derision. He was our Mayakovsky and he was loved. He was pivotal: the first genuinely popular poet to emerge from the radical currents of British poetry since the 1960s. Can that be true? Grief has a way of holding your hands behind your back and then releasing them when you least expect it, so my analysis here will stumble and lilt. My judgement of his work will never be impartial or detached. But let's try it this way, to start with: if you were older than Sean, you saw in his work the culmination of a working-class tradition of formal experimentation, realised in sharp clarity. If you were younger than Sean, all kinds of arguments that seemed to hover around the 1980s and 1990s, geographical and institutional rivalries, basic disagreements about how to do it, seemed to evaporate. He was just *there*, and he was there when it mattered.

The first time I heard him read it was early 2008, just as the financial crisis was really beginning to unravel. He came to Cambridge, wore a long coat and scarf the entire time. He spread his papers out on a table and read from a sequence called “Tracts and Commentaries (A Lecture)”,

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<sup>1</sup> *Voices of the Paris Commune*, ed. and trans. by Mitchell Abidor (Oakland, CA: PM, 2015), p. 91.



of Sean's *Baudelaire in English* which I never showed anyone. To say his work *gave permission* makes him sound like a teacher, and it was never like that, at least not for me. It was more like being shown a new route through some half-known landscape; you could go that way if you wanted to, or when you needed to. It was there before him and it would be there after him. He made no claim on being the one who'd discovered it: someone else had shown it to him, and he would tell you so—Bill Griffiths, Maggie O'Sullivan, Stephen Jonas, Abiezer Coppe. Take your pick.

If it was a landscape it was a city landscape. The poems in "Tracts & Commentaries" point restlessly and relentlessly to the city, to walking around and surviving in it. This was another reason it didn't click for me at first: I had been to London about twice, and had no idea of the scale and dimensions. When Sean wrote about the gentrification of Hackney, how "each borough's puncture / leaks powder", or how the city is "an activity signal", I could only vaguely grasp it. But I moved to London in autumn 2008, and it feels strange to describe it like this, but Sean took me under something like his wing. We were both students at Birkbeck—he was doing his PhD, and I was doing an MA—and we used to go drinking at a terrible bar, the Night and Day Café on Russell Square, near the universities. It was on the ground floor of the Imperial Hotel, where Lenin and Gorky and other exiled Russian revolutionaries had stayed in 1907. Sean liked it because he had gone there early in his relationship with Frances, and so it became, improbably, poetry's domain.

Other people were much closer to Sean than I was, and knew him closely for longer, but for a couple of years I would see Sean every few weeks, usually at a poetry reading, sometimes at a political demonstration. I used to get the bus from South London, sometimes passing Parliament Square, where Brian Haw had set up permanent peace camp in 2001. I remember being with Sean and Frances and others at the G20 protest where Ian Tomlinson was killed by the police. I remember the end of the Sri Lankan civil war, the Tamil hunger strikers, also outside Parliament. Poetry readings were so frequent it felt like they were

woven into the city in the same fabric as the protests: you walked into a room and someone was reading a poem; you walked into the street and someone was protesting. There was nothing in between. There were at least three reliable reading series: Xing the Line, the Blue Bus, and Opened. Opened was my favourite. It took place mostly in the basement of a pub called The Foundry, at the meeting of several arterial roads near Old Street. It was popular with bike couriers, and there was no charge on the door, so people wandered in and out. Maybe I'm exaggerating in memory, but usually someone would come in from the street and would demand to read something, and the organisers—Steve Willey and Alex Davies—would always let them, which I thought was great. The venue was shut down in 2010, sold off to developers in the gigantic corporate restructuring of London during the run-up to the 2012 Olympic Games.

Sean was always a little mysterious about his past. He was a Northerner, obviously from Lancashire, but he'd also lived in Liverpool, Nottingham, Brighton. He would allude to animal rights activism, vaguely new-age anarchist scenes, and his cultural taste—The Fall, The Cramps, *Quatermass and the Pit*, Johnny Cash—put him in a recognisable subculture. But when he talked about his formation as a poet, he talked about Writers Forum, the workshop and press founded by Bob Cobbing. It had been transformative for his work. By the time I met him he'd been performing his poetry seriously for more than ten years, and it was clear that this vocal performance was essential to his writing. It was musical. I remember him reading with the bass player Dominic Lash; reading with Frances in a duo; how much control he had over his voice in any given situation. He was a great reader in a technical sense. He figured out how to breathe around a short line so that the tension could be held and released in quite unexpected ways, adding swerves and reversals to the forward propulsion. I remember a conversation after a reading—maybe it was Lisa Jeschke and Lucy Beynon—wondering if it was possible to have a poetry of *nothing but stress*. That's how it felt sometimes.

During this period—2008, 2009—he was writing *The Commons*, which Opened would publish in book form in 2011: it appeared on his

website in real-time, a fundamental politics of generosity and response. It's a sequence, in three books, of 14-line poems, in the tradition of Tom Raworth's great chronicle of the late Thatcher era collected as *XIV Liners*, and before that the sonnets of Ted Berrigan. It takes elements that had already been present in his work—quotation, collage, and the use of materials from popular revolutionary history—and it enacts them over and over again in the same container:

“move along, ‘fun people’,  
nothing to see here”  
you will have shimmering  
a language of the barricades  
yeh, I know, sorry  
we are all in that death,  
that decade, understood,  
running thru its prescriptions  
its ancient answers, you  
my enemy, doing ‘something’,  
the police, doing ‘the alphabet’  
its secret monarchy, its meaning  
its nice dog functions,  
its corporate poetry sucks.<sup>6</sup>

He wrote them quickly, often in pairs or threes. Phrases circulate, return, come back changed. I guess “a language of the barricades” was something you had to apologise for in 2008; it felt premature. One of his contemporaries recently admonished Bonney for indulging in “decadent fictions” of revolutionary fantasy, and I'm sure others rolled their eyes. But his work was entirely prescient. An early version of *The Commons* carried the subtitle “a diagram of the class struggle”, and every line resounds against the structures of servitude, incarceration, despair.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/2008/12/commons-2-13-14.html> The later published version switches “we are all in that death, / that decade, understood,” for “at least I know / who we're working for”. Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), p. 73.

He was working to dislodge the privatized subject—the ruins of the letter I—and trying to find a language of collective experience without vacating passion and emotion. Richard Owens phrases it beautifully, writing that Bonney’s work *shares precisely that which cannot be shared*.<sup>7</sup>

The readings Sean gave were an essential part of this collective work, each one a kind of wedge of possibility. “As a swarm of mouths | wow & / we were redistributed”, as he puts it in *The Commons*. I remember the booklaunch: Ulli Freer and Nat Raha read, too, all wearing pin-stripe suit jackets, doing angular gasps at speed. The social aspect was important: everyone’s work made everyone else’s work better. I can’t now remember where I read it, but the story goes that the French poets of the 19th century would celebrate the appearance of a great new poet, take it as an achievement of work in the language to everybody’s credit. The English, meanwhile, hateful as ever, would jealously demean any new poet’s breakthrough, perpetually in love with selfish mediocrity. Sean was a French poet, in this respect. He made everyone around him a French poet.

My sense is that “that decade” quoted above refers to the 1980s, Thatcherism—the decade Sean was a teenager, and the damage of which runs like a scar through his writing. But now I look back and see these poems as the start of the 2010s: the slow and unremitting violence of austerity, augmenting the violence of the imperial wars. Right on the cusp of this abyss, I remember Sean’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday party, the light coming through the window, the backyard in Walthamstow. Tim Atkins gave him a copy of Jack Spicer’s *Language*, and Sean gave a reading from it, and I’d eaten too many hash cookies and it felt like the walls were melting. The next summer, the coalition government came into power and the city and everything else changed shape.

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<sup>7</sup> “Prison House of Commons: Sean Bonney Vis-à-vis Thom Donovan”, *Poetry Project Newsletter*, No. 225 (Dec-Jan 2010-11), collected in Richard Owens, *Sauvage: Essays on Anglophone Poetry* (Kenmore, NY: BlazeVox, 2019), pp. 11-17 (p. 17).

Sean was ready for 2010. Really he was way out ahead, and had understood the scale of the social catastrophe even before it had fully taken hold. When the first demonstrations were called about the rise in tuition fees, the poets would march together, meeting at Trafalgar Square and making our way down to Parliament. When the crowd stormed the Tory HQ at Millbank on 10 November, I stood in the courtyard with Sean, with Sophie Robinson, with my sister, with Francesca Lisette—a bunch of us. I don't think we even said anything to each other, just beamed. And of course, here it was: the collective subject that Sean would write to and for and with in his great versions of Rimbaud, collected as *Happiness* in 2011. The model for *Happiness* is Spicer's Lorca: letters to and from the dead, weird messages coming through, a poetics of the clandestine and the damned. The Rimbaud poems overlapped with *The Commons*, but they really took off during the winter of sustained and regular protest marches and police violence in Central London. His work was scorched with the intensity of it all. For many of his readers, these lines are almost too famous to quote, but I do so because they were important:

When you meet a Tory on the street, cut his throat  
It will bring out the best in you.  
It is as simple as music or drunken speech.  
There will be flashes of obsolete light.  
You will notice the weather only when it starts to die.<sup>8</sup>

People had arguments about this poem. People deliberated about whether poets should really be saying this kind of thing. We wondered if it broke any laws. Sean himself, as I understand it, stopped performing this poem at readings after the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox by a fascist in 2016. I remember his self-scrutiny, how committed he was to understanding his own writing, both its alchemy and its shortcomings, whether it was useful and who it could be used by. He did the work, tirelessly, with dwindling institutional support and little financial security. It took discipline.

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8 Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 136.

In the summer of 2011 he wrote the first of his great sequence of Letters, full of menace and humour. The high watermark was the “Letter on Riots and Doubt”, composed two days before London erupted into widespread rioting in response to the police killing of Mark Duggan. Like I say, Sean was *really* ready for all of this. He was thinking about it before it happened, which meant that he was never simply “reacting”, or “commenting” in a detached way. Because he was always closing the gap between the sphere of poetry and practical social struggles it meant the work could be oblique, even obscure, and still make perfect sense. That winter he came to Cambridge to teach a seminar on Revolutionary Poetics. We used to meet in the drama studio, a strange windowless room, and we would work through poems and essays, maybe a dozen of us. I remember in particular a reading and long discussion of David Henderson’s “Keep on Pushing”, about the Harlem riots of 1964. We kept coming back to bits of Marx, the 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire—“there, the phrase exceeded the content. Here the content exceeds the phrase”—and the idea of “the poetry of the future”. We struggled with the formulas of the Situationist International essay “All the King’s Men”, which demanded that we “put revolution at the service of poetry”. This sounded pretty good to me, but Sean was sceptical. In this context he *was* a teacher, serious and gentle, a little tiger of wrath among the horses of instruction.

What happened after that is complicated, and I think was mainly a kind of transatlantic jostling for attention between the poets of Sean’s generation, which coincided with the defeat of the student movement and the ensuing political repression. There was a lot of online grandstanding and flailing about. Sean co-organised the Poetry and Revolution conference at Birkbeck in 2012, which was a real occasion, even if I found it frustrating. It felt like everything was collapsing, and we didn’t know if the ceiling or the floor would be the first to go. I was dealing with my own stuff, as they say. I remember getting into a totally stupid drunken row with Sean about his *Letters Against the Firmament* book, which was part of a series forthcoming from Enitharmon. I thought it was selling out: corporate poetry sucks! I yelled, in an alley near the British Museum. I was wrong, obviously,

but it's hard to share things when you're feeling defeated. And there was a lot of bad feeling floating around, never quite stated in the open, with so little "open" left.

But Sean and Frances's place in Walthamstow was still a kind of sanctuary, even if he wrote things like this:

I think I'm becoming slightly unwell. I've developed a real fear of the upstairs neighbours. Every morning they emit a foul stench of bitumen and bitter, moral superiority as they stomp through the corridor on their way to work. A while ago I told you I rarely leave the house, now I can't, they've spun a web of 9-to-5 self-worth across the door, a claim on the law, moebius claws. I'm trapped. I keep the curtains closed. Don't answer the phone.<sup>9</sup>

I remember the London Poetry Festival in 2014, seeing Tom Raworth read for the last time, meeting Jack Frost from the United States, Sean being a pretty much hopeless compere but he and Frances throwing one of the all-time great parties. David Grundy wore an amazing vest that said "Athlète de Coeur". Everyone has their own end, or series of ends, and this was one of my endings. I remember being with Jack in America the following spring as it turned into summer, and everywhere we went we heard "Keep on Pushing", the Curtis Mayfield song, and I would think about David Henderson, I would think about Sean. One morning I woke up early and read the news about the Charleston massacre, and suddenly we were in two different worlds: one where it had happened and one where it hadn't happened yet. Sean's work tried to chart these fissures, these cracks in experience, the things they release. When I came back to England, Sean had moved to Berlin, and the transformation was complete: London was a kind of shell. Every time I pass where the Foundry used to be, or that place near the church where we had breakfast, or I go past the Night and Day bar, I like to quote Baudelaire: the form of the city changes faster than the human heart. Or as Sean puts it in *Baudelaire in English*:

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9 Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, p. 108.

“( the city is a hoax;;; / was walking through / THE OLD CITY has DISSOLVED”.<sup>10</sup>

In Berlin Sean’s work was dark and shattered, and I find it hard to look at. “My tiny racist island I leave to the monsters and poisons”, he wrote, doing Villon via the late Stephen Rodefer. Or this:

Fearful we’ll abandon our history or steal it. Fearful we’ll set up borders around that history. Fearful we’ll drive up rents on that history and talk and talk and talk about the old days in meter and rhyme while the pigs close the borders. Fearful we’ll be those borders. Fearful we’ll confuse those borders with songs and sit inside those songs as if they were the scars on our veins.<sup>11</sup>

Again, this is more self-scrutiny than self-indulgence, written in the midst of a series of more-or-less unbroken political catastrophes: the endless Tory government, the Brexit vote, Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro, the rest of them. In Berlin he was at one remove from the strange optimism of the Corbyn movement. I think of his writing of this period as a kind of grey, the shade of concrete. Each word set down with finitude, a poet who knows his own gestures and understands his task. I think what became Sean’s late work—the poems in the *Ghosts* pamphlet (2017), and those in *Our Death* (2019) might yet prove to be his greatest work. These are painful poems, militant and vulnerable, using every resource at his disposal to shape his uncompromising antifascism. When he read from it in London and Cambridge in February 2018 it felt like he’d made some kind of improbable breakthrough, and that he would just keep going. All of his modes were available to him: they were no longer his, they were everyone’s, he was just showing you a way it could be.

I was with David Grundy inside the British Museum, looking at Egyptian artefacts when we found out he was dead. We went to the Night and Day bar and then we walked around in a daze, and the daze

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<sup>10</sup> Bonney, *Baudelaire in English* (London: Veer, 2008), p. 48.

<sup>11</sup> Bonney, *Our Death* (Oakland, CA: Commune, 2019), p. 35.

continued through the election, through Sean's funeral the day after the Tories were re-elected for what feels like the hundredth time, through the university strikes, through the Covid-19 outbreak, through the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer and the last days of the Trump regime. Now we have an era: from 11 September 2001 to whatever it is we're in now. He was there for all of it, even when he wasn't. "*At times like this, the universe / hangs over us. When we block it out it roars.*"<sup>12</sup>

He was our Sean Bonney. He was loved.

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<sup>12</sup> 'Abject, after Baudelaire', *Our Death*, 105.