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# 'This Face of Glee…This Terrifying Sound': Sean Bonney Through the Soundhole, Where Bonney IS

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This article delineates Sean Bonney's ambivalence towards 20th Century sound poetry and his complex relationship with sound and visual poet Bob Cobbing (1920–2002). To do this the article reads one of Bonney's early poems 'For Bob, Cobbing Through the Soundhole, Where Cobbing IS' – a poem Bonney read at Cobbing's 80th birthday and funeral – alongside *Our Death*, Bonney's last book. The way Bonney responded to Cobbing's life and death may offer a guide to how we respond to *Our Death* after Bonney's passing. In their commitment to counter state violence, the article identifies a fierce anti-Thatcherite politics alongside a poetics of vulnerability and hospitality, which they extend to each other, to the interned, the displaced and the dispossessed.

Bob's sense of the page as a score, and of anything being performable – going beyond even language – was fascinating to me. I loved the way he would focus on the text as material, would blow up the words until they fell apart, become simply marks on the page, and then still perform them. My Baudelaire poems were very consciously a response to his work – though I still insisted on content: for me, I want my poetry to still talk about things. More and more I'm interested in poetry as a form of communication, and the ways it can communicate that are specific to poetry, as distinct from other forms.

> Sean Bonney (2011) quoted in Zoë Skoulding, *Poetry & Listening, The Noise of the Lyric* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 53.

For the vast majority of people, including the working class, the politicised workers and students are simply incomprehensible. Think about that when you're going on about rebarbative avant-garde language. Or this: simple anticommunication, borrowed today from Dadaism by the most reactionary champions of established lies, is worthless in an era when the most urgent question is to create a new communication on all levels of practice, from the most simple to the most complex.

> Sean Bonney, 'Letters on Poetics' in *Happiness: Poems After Rimbaud* (London: Unkant, 2011), 64.

Bob Cobbing's (1920–2002) sound and visual poetry was part of a third phase of Western sound poetry which extended the work of the Dadaists before him.[1] Sean Bonney's response to Cobbing's influence is emotionally inflected (note from the epigraph above that he 'loved' and was 'fascinated' by Cobbing's focus on the materiality of text), but with bitter humour he problematises the revolutionary value of incomprehensibility as a legacy of Dadaism (a movement which was part of sound poetry's second phase). I want to delineate the affective content in Bonney's ambivalence towards Cobbing's work and its poetic antecedents, as evidenced in my two opening quotations, to show how the enduring influence of Cobbing's poetry on Bonney's manifests in a poetic turn to feeling as a resource of illegibility that motivates social relations resistant to corporate and state violence.

As feelings are embodied, and therefore seemingly unmediated emotional experiences, they are a quality and a capacity that can be closely associated with sound, and sound is often credited with having a special ability to move us: 'sounds seem to cut through symbolic and material boundaries, granting musical immediacy particular legitimacy as a communicative practice' argues cultural-geographer George Revill.[2] Bonney and Cobbing (as the Dadaists did before them) understood this connection, and

challenge the power that underpins sound's communicative legitimacy. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, economist and cultural-theorist Jacques Attali outlines three strategic uses of music by power: 'ritual power when it is a question of making people forget the fear of violence', 'representative power when it is a question of making them believe in order and harmony' and 'bureaucratic power when it is a question of silencing those who oppose it'.[3] In Attali's terms, Cobbing's poem 'If He Knew What He Was Doing, He Would Do It Better', which takes negative reviews of his own sound poetry as found material for a word-based poem, comically articulates a challenge to representative and bureaucratic power:

> Sockless in sandals,
> gibbering his wares
> in unintelligible shrieks and hisses,
> a 'poet' merely disrupts
> the solid, sensible business
> of the night.
>
> the people hear gibberish;
> Poets ! how can nothing be said
> with all that noise?[4]

Likened to senseless 'shrieks and hisses' and dismissed by reviewers as 'gibberish', Cobbing's sound poetry performances were often placed on the other side of what culture sanctions as both poetry and music. Here Cobbing playfully resists his attempted silencing to argue that 'noise' holds within it the potential for new communication ('how can nothing be said'). 'With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world', argued Attali: 'With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men'.[5] Bonney's ambivalence about Cobbing's practice of exploding letter forms into a score for 'unintelligible' vocal performance that departs from normative, comprehensible speech, stems from a concern that the visual and sonic 'noise' of Cobbing's poetry (whilst once 'fascinating' and worthy of love) had ceased to be sufficiently disruptive to the established harmonies that police capitalist society ('the solid sensible business of the night'). For this reason, Cobbing's noises can no longer be considered properly communicative; they are loved, but very much in the past tense.

Concerns about the potential assimilation of the subversive potential of sound poetry – the codification of its noise by power – are compounded and motivated by Bonney's hearing of his political moment. The sounds of late 2010, coming into 2011,

included horse hooves on tarmac, as mounted police charged into anti-austerity and anti-tuition fee protestors as part of their concerted and often violent suppression. These sounds also included the Metropolitan Police Commissioner's subsequent denial that such a tactic had been used on protestors, who included teenagers protesting against cuts to the Education Maintenance Allowance.[6] On 4 August 2011 the sounds swelled to include the police gunshots that killed Mark Duggan, the riots that followed, and the Independent Police Complaints Commission's public, but incorrect suggestion, that Duggan had himself fired at police officers.[7] In this political context defined by 'anticommunication', where nationally broadcast lies become a divisive tactic of social control to justify killing, Bonney insists on 'content', he wants to 'talk about things'. Yet, in seeking 'new communication on all levels of practice', he still wants to disturb the lines of power which constitute and police social relations, and which also discriminate between music and noise. In words borrowed from Bonney's 'Second Letter on Harmony', the poetry wants to free us of capital's 'untruth, its site of corporate slaughter − i.e. ritual slaughter— the silent frequency at the centre of its oh so gentle melodies'.[8]

More explicitly than is found in Cobbing's work then − but, as I will come to argue, not more fundamentally − Bonney situates death and murder as 'silent frequencies' at the centre of his rearticulation of relations between music, noise, power and feeling. This finds extreme expression in *Our Death*, Bonney's last book, where an insistence on content (talking about death whilst living death as a condition of life) takes on a strongly affective dimension: 'panic', 'love', 'grief', 'hatred', fearlessness − 'I am fearful of nothing' − 'boredom' and 'pain', are just some of the historically specific feelings that by 2019 come to punctuate the first six poems in the 'Our Death' sequence of *Our Death*.[9] David Grundy characterizes the poem's 'affective dimensions of…alienation' and Keston Sutherland notes 'the rhythm of extreme states', its 'revolutionary melancholy'. [10] In *Our Death*, the representation, performance and militant targeting of feeling are part of an apocalyptic, revolutionary politics, where the articulation of feeling is not just closely associated with the organisation of sound, but sometimes becomes its silent, internalised proxy: the discrimination of feeling representing the value of sound and its differentiation by power on a noise/music axis in a larger calculation to do with poetry's political efficacy. We hear a basis for this exchange of feeling for sound in Bonney's quotation of Amiri Baraka's short story 'The Screamers' in his 'Second Letter on Harmony' where 'a screamed riff' that 'pushed its insistence past music' is also 'hatred and frustration and secrecy and despair'.[11] We also hear it in Attali's socio-historical and biological account of noise. Noting that noise has long been culturally associated with the idea of the weapon, blasphemy, and plague (plague

being a preoccupation of *Our Death*) Attali argues that 'noise is a source of pain' and that beyond 'a certain limit, it becomes an immaterial weapon of death':

> A weapon of death. It became that with the advent of industrial technology. […] Since it is a threat of death, noise is a concern of power; when power founds its legitimacy on the fear it inspires, on its capacity to create social order, on its univocal monopoly of violence, it monopolises noise.[12]

Fear, violence, death, power, music, and noise. Whilst the persistent interrelation of these terms forms the background hum of this article, I will expound a more specific claim. Namely, that the co-emergence of noise and feeling as a method of inhabiting and challenging the silent frequencies of corporate slaughter predates Bonney's poetry of 2019 and 2011 and is part-rooted in a more personal experience of death, traceable to Bonney's much earlier poem, 'For Bob, Cobbing Through the Soundhole, Where Cobbing IS', published in *Blade Pitch Control Unit* in 2005.[13]

The poem has an interesting history. A previous, untitled and substantially different version of 'Through the Soundhole' was written for and performed at Cobbing's 80th birthday celebration on 23 September 2000 and published the same day by Writers Forum.[14] Paul Dutton remembers that by 1998 Cobbing was 'suffering from arthritis in his back and hips' and had 'suffered a minor stroke', but he notes that the 80th birthday celebrations two years later offered more 'cheering news', marked as they were by a five-hour performance. Despite this upturn in Cobbing's health, all that attended (including Bonney) would have been aware that Cobbing might not be alive for much longer.[15] When he did die two years later, in 2002, Bonney was asked to perform 'Through the Soundhole' at the funeral, and then again at a memorial event that followed. It is this revised version of the poem which is published in *Blade Pitch Control Unit.* Vulnerability and humour typify many of Bonney's anecdotes about Cobbing. This one stands out for its modulation of feelings of loss with thoughts about poetry's publication:

> He became ill, you know, and over the course of a couple of weeks. Like when any-body dies… it was… it was… I still miss him. I mean, you know, the things that I've written since, you start getting old and suddenly the number of people who you've known and loved who died escalates and you know, he's one of them. I'd like to…I certainly liked to have shown him my Baudelaire poems because I think he'd have liked them and I would have liked him to publish them, actually. [*Bonney falls silent*] I think the proudest moment in my entire poetry career, if you want to call it that, was being asked to read at Bob's funeral and I think it always will be unless some-thing really major happens. [*"What did you read?" I ask*]. Well, there's the poem in

*Blade Pitch Control Unit* which I wrote for Bob's 80ᵗʰ birthday, oh god, what's it called, for 'Bob Cobbing Through the Soundhole', and I read that, and I can remember the major thing… I was scared, because his coffin was right next to me and I was moving about like I do when I read, and I was worried I was going to knock his coffin over. I remember that, but yeah that's… [*Bonney falls silent again*] I felt that was a major, major honour, man, to be asked to do that, and I continue to be proud of it and I don't quite think that anything that happens to me in my poetry life is going to exceed that really.[16]

Honour has a complex relationship to time. Reading this poem at Cobbing's funeral made Bonney feel honoured, but the poem was a way of honouring Cobbing. Honour also denotes a promise, something that you give to the future (i.e., one's 'word of honour'); as you persist in keeping your word, honour is also a feeling the future gives to you. Defined by its liminality, performed for Cobbing at the end of his life and then revised and republished in the wake of his death, the poem draws together an intense awareness of Cobbing's biography, his published poetics, and his methods of making poetry, with a revolutionary framing of sound's relationship to individual and collective transformation that perhaps only has its chance of recognition at a point of death. This chance at recognition, this reorganisation of time, is what Bonney calls the 'soundhole' – the possibility of breaking, speaking, and sounding through the violence of capitalist conceptions of space and time which limit our experience of reality. In naming this conjunction, the poem is anticipatory of this later articulation from 'Letter on Harmony and Sacrifice' (2012):

According to some cosmological systems, and ones not so far removed from our own as we would maybe imagine, when anyone dies – be that Margaret Thatcher or Mark Duggan – they take their place among what are called the "invisibles", traditionally opening up a gap in social time, a system of antimatter in which nobody can live, but from which new understandings and arrangements of social harmony may be imagined.[17]

In its next sentence 'Letter' cautions that this revolutionary hope is 'essentially hymn-singing'. In the sentence after that it asks us to think seriously about 'those "invisibles" as being not too dissimilar to so-called "undesirables", all those refugees banged up in the various holding cells that cluster in rings outside airports and cities etc'.[18] Taking this latter interpretation as dominant, I'm interested in the cosmological realignments and the gap in social time that opens up when thinking about these four deaths together: Cobbing's, Bonney's, Thatcher's and the social and literal death bestowed by capitalist

life on the figure of the refugee by the limits that same life places on movement and visibility, which in Bonney's work is often figured as an audibility, where the noises we can't hear are the people we refuse to see. Many deaths haunt *Our Death*, but the way Bonney responds to Cobbing's life and death in his poetry offers a guide to how we might respond to *Our Death* after Bonney's own passing in 2019.

### Reading 'Cobbing Through the Soundhole' into *Our Death*

The compressed syntax of 'Through the Soundhole' avoids an explicit celebration of Cobbing's life and a nostalgic commemoration. In comparison to Bonney's touching memory of its performance cited above, the poem performs a transmutation of grief (to borrow language from *Our Death*).[19] Here are its opening lines:

> IS A VERB IS ::: the pupil of the eye is ::: to gate to verse ::: to
> reach over, sunrise, to seize, to live through ::: casting metel,
> pouring oil ::: to METEL to scry to ::: flow to wilder to ::: to lament
> wailer ::: to invoke spider ::: to under ::: to stand under to ::: take
> wing ::: to turn the ground ::: well ::: spring ::: to brighten ::: the
> palmprint, casting, seizing over ::: VOWELPIT ::: to turn the :::
> turn the ::: old ::: duplicator ::: handle to ::: turn ::: one's role ::: to
> roll ::: to reach over, sunrise ::: to roll the ground ::: one's life the
> ::: mark on the paper the ::: sound ::: emitted ::: the skyline ::: to
> sing ::: is a verb ::: to signal ::: the vowelpit ::: from vessel to vessel

The poem begins with the word 'is', the third person singular present indicative of 'be'. Being, like the concept of existence itself, is put under pressure from the start of the poem. As verbs are doing words, 'IS A VERB IS' implies that the meaning of being is in doing. Indebted to the syncopated rhythms of jazz and the scorching blasts of punk, grammatically incomplete sentences put pressure on English grammar.[20] Is the word 'to' used as a preposition where ': : :' indicates motion in the direction of a location, towards the nouns 'gate' and 'verse', or is 'to' an adverb modifying the verbs 'gate' and 'verse', with 'to gate' and 'to verse' being things the 'pupil of the eye' does? The word 'gate' connotes a border. The argument is suggestive: In what ways is sight a 'gate'; in what ways are borders like the verses of poems; who or what exists beyond the borders of being as determined by sight and language? These questions are propelled forward, unresolved, by the phrase 'to reach over'. Here I see an arm reaching over to unlatch a gate, but this image is not given. Instead the poem reaches back, through the circular shape of the pupil, through the black hole of the iris, to the corona ciliaris, the folded

and most anterior portion of the ciliary body, and by metaphorical association with that unspoken word *corona*, it reaches 'over' and out to the centre of the solar system then back to earth, to 'sunrise': the border between night and day.[21] In the earlier version of the poem (where an open bracket is yet to be replaced by the triple colon as the poem's defining grammatical-visual aspect) the allusions to the cosmological are more explicit. The poem references the radio waves emitted from the sun and the zodiacal division of space into twelve equal parts, through one of which the sun passes in each month: 'thru th Soundhole th smoke plough ( zodiac ( its nature that's obscene its radar ( flicker noise light ( '.[22] These 'obscene' noises haunt both my reading of the latter version of the poem and *Our Death*. So as the poem reaches over sunrise, 'to reach over, sunrise' (i.e., to exceed, to get beyond sunrise) I reach for images of the sun in *Our Death*, where the speaker settles for 'nothing less than the obliteration of the sun'; 'One day the sun will finally go down'; 'The shapes it makes are repellent', it says.[23] This is a necessary reach: from obscene to repellent, the metaphoric contours and apocalyptic energies of *Our Death* are being worked out in this earlier poem which Bonney forged at the end of Cobbing's life and performed in the wake of his death.

When listening to the poem in performance we might imagine its speed as equivalent to 'the storm that gets caught' in the angel's wings in Benjamin's reading of Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*: words are chosen carefully for the 'historical wreckage' they carry but their vocal delivery does not allow us to 'make whole what has been smashed'.[24] We do the work of recovery in the silence that is the poem's end. Two examples of the recovery work made possible through focussing on word choice comes with the interplay of 'to scry' and 'to seize'. As defined by the *OED*, in its noun form 'scry' is an 'obsolete' word, denotive of 'crying out, shout, exclamation, clamour', but it also represents a fault in the dictionary. An early example of its use from 1450 was 'from an older form of the treatyse of *Fysshynge wyth an angle*', attributed to Dame Juliana Barnes: 'The blastes of hornys and the scrye of foulis'. This was 'misunderstood by Skinner (*Etymologicon*, 1671), who interpreted "scrye of foules' to mean a flock of wild fowl"'. The error is important in the context of Bonney's poetry because it conflates and then authoritatively privileges (via the dictionary) the communal, non-human action of the flock (something which is visible) over the noisy signal of that action (something which is not). The inclusion of 'take wing' and 'the skyline' (a description of the flock) alongside 'to lament wailer' (a description of sound) in 'Through the Soundhole' indicates Bonney was alert to the error. The *OED* notes that this error was 'repeated by Blount 1674, and appears in many dictionaries'.[25] Bonney was still thinking about the dictionary as a site of collective struggle in 2019, as we see from a blog post titled 'Heroes' that accompanies an announcement of *Our Death*'s publication. The

post addresses Mustapha Khayati (writer of a 'Preface to a Situationist Dictionary'): 'When you were writing your dictionary, did you have any sense which words might be snitches and which might be scabs'.[26]

The errant metaphorical constellations signalled by 'scry' (neither snitch nor scab) extend into *Our Death*: 'I think of my friends as blackbirds/screeching from rooftops'.[27] This collective screech, this 'scry' that emanates from blackbirds that perch on the roofs of private property, is the noise of communal social relations antagonistic to, but embedded in, capitalist economies. The screeching hostility draws upon a secondary meaning of 'scry': to denote an 'attack'. In *Our Death* these 'friends' are 'murdered by rising rents', a precarity which directs us back to the linguistic wreckage of 'Through the Soundhole', and the verb 'seize', which has a legalistic meaning dating to 1290: 'To put (a person) in legal possession *of* a feudal holding; to invest or endow *with* property; to establish *in* a holding or an office or dignity'. 'Immediately upon the death of a vassal the superior was entitled to enter and take *seisin* or possession of the land', wrote William Blackstone in 1753.[28] 'To seize' can also mean to settle or reside, to legally arrest or apprehend, or to catch or grasp with the hand or mind. In its rarer noun form the word refers to mechanical seizing: 'The heat causes the cylinder and the piston rings to expand until [...] they become jammed irremovably together, precipitating what is known [...] as a "seize"'.[29] Due to his epilepsy and the frightening possibility of 'inducing a fit' when getting to 'certain heights' in performance, the word also speaks to Bonney's desire to find an equilibrium between control and an intensity of emotion in vocal delivery.[30]

'To seize' then, means a complete and irreversible moment of non-functioning within an industrialised society, the result of revolutionary heat and pressure, the word having a history of use that takes in pre-capitalist, feudalistic modes of production, unfair land distribution and forced possession, including of one's own body: 'there was one time when I was in the preliminary stages of a full fit as I was reading', writes Bonney, 'I wasn't in my body, floating all around the room – I scared the shit out of myself'.[31] Seizure in performance also speaks to our planetary existence: fixed, embodied, and earthbound we also elliptically orbit the 'flicker noise light' of our sun. The verticality of these dynamics are reworked across the two versions of 'Through the Soundhole'. References to the 'plough' star constellation in the earlier version are brought down to earth in the latter, where the phrases 'to turn the ground' and 'to roll the ground' are suggestive of the lifting, rolling, agricultural work of the plough, with an underlying reference to the title of Abiezer Coppe's pamphlet *A Fiery Flying Roll* (1649), a title which brings together many of the denotations of 'to seize' and 'to scry'. In an early statement of poetics, connected to the poem through the distinctive triple colon, Bonney wrote:

4 ::: for many years I had problems with the word "poetry" (thorngust mothfloom) because the official english story is one of modesty quietism self-satisfaction (black noise black noise) but the real line goes Gerard Winstanley Abeizer Coppe William Blake Bob Cobbing and on and on [...] the real line is wild[.][32]

In the homophonic slide between 'roll' and 'role', the roll of the duplicator's ink-filled rollers (on which Cobbing made his poems) is suggestively connected to a change in one's professional 'role'. The poem also conceivably seizes on Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* to offer another inflection: 'The proletariat *seizes* political power and turns the means of production into state property. But, in doing this, it abolishes itself as proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions [*i.e., all roles*]'.[33] This poem isn't naïvely arguing for exact equivalences between Cobbing's use of the duplicator, the political role of the proletariat in an imagined communist future, or the past role of Diggers like Winstanley who tried to "take back the turf", but it does dig into the fissures that exist between them, and each are connected through the idea that action ('doing') brings forth new modes of being at a moment of death. In *Our Death*, Bonney writes:

Poetry, what's it for
Comes from "doing"
Means "Do It"
I would like an answer
From the immobilized[34]

A 'seize' is a form of immobilisation and whilst in *Our Death* Bonney wants an answer from the stateless and the imprisoned, in the style of Cobbing 'Through the Soundhole' remains mobile, using permutation to turn phrases over repeatedly: '::: more like itself ::: in other elements ::: reside ::: elements (thorngust) ::: elements (mothfloom) ::: in the turn ::: in the hands ::: in elements'.[35] As Bonney read these words in 2002 with Cobbing's coffin next to him, worried that he was going to knock it over as he moved his body, he was trying to recover lessons from Cobbing's life in its 'turn' to death by unsentimentally digging with the smashed and recombinatory shards of the poem, into and over Cobbing's corpus. He did so to herald the future, to make audible – to borrow from Attali's description of the prophetic function of music – 'the new world that will gradually become visible, that will impose itself and regulate the order of things...'[36]

'Music is prophecy', argued Attali because its 'styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code'.[37] A third meaning of 'to scry' (a word only included in the version of the poem published after Cobbing's death) is

relevant to how 'Through the Soundhole' anticipates the poetry and poetics set down in *Our Death.* In the practice of scrying a witch or fortune-teller uses a mirror (often made of obsidian) to convene with the dead, to conjure visions and prophesies. It is a practice and possibility Bonney returns to frequently in *Our Death*, albeit with deep pessimism. In 'Thrash Me' the speaker announces their poetics: 'I see in the dark and like to smash mirrors'. This poetics is put into practice in the poems that follow. 'Approximations of the Solar Enemy' opens with the claim 'I don't look in the mirror very often'. It goes on to argue that Shelly's description of poets as mirrors that reflect the "gigantic shadows that futurity casts on the present" is outdated in a world where futurity has been 'cancelled', and after wanting to smash his own reflection in a mirror described as a 'crude calendar of incidents' that 'make sounds' like the 'fingernails of ghosts', the poem instead longs 'for a mirror that reflects nothing. A piece of carnal glass' that can cut 'our shadows from whatever remains of the prisons of the sky'. In 'A Reference to the Voices' the speaker remembers walking up streets 'clutching a broken wing mirror, demanding that strangers read their faces and their systems in its cracks', but this memory is also recognised as 'armageddon itself … an impossible syncopation, a new kind of darkness'. In 'We Are the Dead' the speaker's hand becomes 'like a murderer's mirror, a vicious and impassable glass. Not a glass a gaze, a glare. Not light, but "Prophecy"' – but prophecy is a word that now can only be associated with 'surveillance, with cameras and judges'.[38] Rather than covering mirrors as is the custom in some cultures of mourning, in *Our Death* there is a ritualistic, kaleidoscopic, reproduction and smashing of reflective surfaces. Inside the deceptive unity of the poem's prose block, mirrors are repeatedly born smashed, or soon become so, each time re-imaging the world they variously reflect to the point that no total, coherent picture of a poem as presenting a distinct image of death is allowed to emerge. What we do see in Bonney's reproduction of these multiple broken mirrors is the persistent toil of the poem's imaginative mirror work. Refusing myths of individualism, possessiveness, or stable relations between subjects and objects, enactments of self-realisation or the creation of a separate identity in front of a mirror, the poem creates mirrors in order to foreground self-hauntings, to produce 'deep silence', whilst clinging to the possibility that though distorted fragmentation one might still be a participant-witness to the world's violence.[39] If the poem uses mirrors to produce a 'new kind of darkness…just outside your sight', then to see into this darkness the shards of smashed mirrors need to become shovel-like.[40] As Grundy reminds us, *Our Death* was initially entitled 'Letters on Turmoil', so it is notable that the quotation the *OED* gives to document the now obsolete definition of 'turmoil' – meaning 'harassing labour' and 'toil' – focusses on a scene of night digging: 'Myning and digging tynne and mettall oute of the grounde

both daye and night with great turmoyle and laboure (1569 R. Grafton *Chron.* II. 915)'. 'Letter in Turmoil' became the title of the first poem in the 'Our Death' sequence. In this naming, Bonney reminds us that the poem does not surrender itself completely to apocalypse – there is still work to be done in the dark – and the example of extractive labour given by the *OED* (which *Our Death* resists) is notably distinct from the poem's work of digging, sifting, and scattered reflecting, which was also performed by 'Through the Soundhole' in response to Cobbing's death.

## Seized by Death in *Our Death*

'Through the Soundhole' is a process of excavation of lessons that Bonney brought to the surface in different ways across the next nineteen years of his life, and the historical energies of personal and collective struggle contained in the word 'seize' are one form this elaboration took. In '34/On the Hatred of the Sun' Bonney writes:

> Every evening it's like the sun smashes into the earth. It's been doing it now for a few weeks. The sky splits into two and all the details of our lives – desires and facts and *seizures* – flare up from somewhere behind the horizon and produce embittered maps, random shreds of detritus that seem almost to be meaningful.[41] (italics mine)

The 'seizures' the sun induces position it as a collaborator, offering up content and promising meaning to the poet. The idea of the sun as a collaborator is taken from a reading given by poet Aditi Machado of another monumentally significant poem of apocalypse by Lebanese American poet Etel Adnan: *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980).[42] Of Adnan's poem Machado writes: 'even as the sun illuminates terrestrial, human-sourced catastrophes, it itself undergoes catastrophic change. Violence and decay are not merely being witnessed; they infect the very process by which we observe and record'.[43] The idea that the sun *infects* with violence how and what we see, is a defining feature of Bonney's poem, which speaks explicitly of plague:

> All human data is scrawled across the sky. [...] Somewhere further off are the names given to human love. But then unfortunately those names get entwined with the screams of the victims of the Peterloo Massacre, get entwined with plague doors, with the hideous noises that business leaders would make if they were to look into a mirror at midnight.[44]

Machado argues that a major innovation of Adnan's text is that there 'are at least two witnesses, one human and the other nonhuman, and that they are intersubjectively

involved in the unfolding catastrophes'.[45] She argues that the 'sun, as collaborator, is the *other* witness of the apocalypse...at times sorrowful...and at others wreaking havoc'.[46] Bonney's sun is equally a force of sorrow – '[t]he darkness of that mirror, which is not quite equal to the darkness and silence inside the opened mouth of someone drowning in the Mediterranean, right now. Oh yes. So many things to hear and see etc., in the dreams of the dying sun'. At the same time, it is a force of hostility:

> As the sun nears the rim of the planet we stare directly into it. We are unsmiling and terrified. We can feel it etching itself into our retina. The shapes it makes are repellent. Here is the burning hospital. Here is the salivating fascist.[47]

Machado reads Adnan's sun 'not as some casual pathetic fallacy but at the endpoint of an extreme logic in which who else but the sun is left to witness us'.[48] The 'we' of Bonney's poem is compelled to witness this extreme non-human point of witness as they decide and then are forced – fixed in a position of terrified but revelatory vulnerability – to feel the sun's etching gaze on their own eye. After this solar scene, reminiscent of the work of the Apparatus in Kafka's short story 'In the Penal Colony' – where a set of needles inscribe on the condemned body the name of the law they have violated – and in a synesthetic move reminiscent of Cobbing, the poem ends by translating the image of violation into sound: 'Here is the eternal ringing of the imaginary city walls. When the sun goes down we can still hear that ringing. It is our voices. A huge cacophonous reckoning before the night silences us with its fists'.[49]

Bonney learned from Cobbing how vulnerability and terror could be intertwined in sound to force powerful realignments in understanding. The part-collaborative, part-revelatory, part-terrifying relationship to the sun in Bonney's apocalyptic poetry of noisy witness forms a distant rhyme with an anecdote Bonney shared about his first experience of visiting a Writers Forum workshop:

> At the time it was an assault on everything. I remember, I don't know whether it was some kind of paranoia or something on my part, but I was sitting on the chair here, Bob was directly opposite me kind of over there, and every time I looked up [...] his eyes were fixed on me. You know, he is a fairly small but stocky, by that point old man, looking at me with this face of glee whilst making this terrifying sound. I didn't know what to think, I mean I thought it was great, but certainly I went away from that first workshop I went to... it made me rethink a lot of things. You know what I mean?[50]

The affective quality of Cobbing's sound poetry – it's 'terrifying sound' combined with his 'face of glee', his joyous and unflinching gaze – and the affective quality of its

reception ('some kind of paranoia') is a dominant feature of Bonney's recollection, but so too are the power dynamics these emotions map; so too is humour.

Cobbing was practiced at creating these dynamics as they were for him a pedagogy. Here is a description of Cobbing's pedagogy, seen at a nascent stage taken from a 1977 interview with Eric Mottram:

> When I stand up in front of the audience and make these weird sounds, it is prob‐ably quite alarming, quite surprising, quite shocking for them, and quite ludicrous also, and this is the first step: you make people laugh at it. That is one aspect of it. Another aspect, of course, is devising poems that are so very simple that there is no real effort required in joining in. [...] If you start off with something very simple, and almost get right down *in* your audience, you will find that someone will come out with a syllable [...] Once you have uttered something, once you have actually dared to open your mouth and shout something out, it gives you courage [...] There is always one person in the audience who really suddenly discovers that they have this ability. I always look out for that person; there he is, or there she is [...] and [I] say: come on, you are going to read this. "No, I couldn't possibly!" And I say: come on! And they do, they do it beautifully [...] Here's somebody, it is not so difficult, somebody who is prepared to make a fool of themselves, and it was actually rather nice [...] We rather enjoyed that.[51]

Writing simple poems, being prepared to make a fool of oneself, and the risk involved in collapsing the hierarchy between performer and audience are all forms of vulnerability. Yet, trying to create improvised sociality through the performance of sound can tip easily into feelings of loneliness. Mottram reflects on the relation between inhibition and the shock of letting out a shriek for the first time: 'One has a horror of finding oneself, or at least I have myself, feeling like a timid little man, all on one's own, saying it, and nobody else is there'.[52] The anticipatory silence before the making of non‐musical noise can force a reconsideration of social relations by making the subject confront their isolation: what if no one else is there to hear or answer, now, or forever? The relationship between social isolation and noise is vehemently pursued and further politicised in *Our Death*: 'loneliness.../ destroys private property. knows all your music is prison'.[53] Here loneliness is an emotion, a form of knowledge, and a kind of hearing that listens to the violence of organised sound as policed and produced by capitalism to reveal its horrid truth.

Cobbing also recalls how an openness to vulnerability expressed as and through noise could induce rage:

> There was always somebody in the audience who really went red in the face and got in a sort of rage with his umbrella and really denounced the whole thing. [...] Do you remember at Cambridge, we did that there. This chap and I absolutely shrieked at each other, growled at each other, and sort of threatened each other and made wild sounds at each other, and then suddenly I relaxed and started laughing, and so did he, and we ended up very much together, and there was this beautiful, lovely serene ending when we were absolutely in accord.[54]

Bonney would likely have been sceptical of the neat resolution into communion that Cobbing describes, seeing instead a false image of reconciliation, yet Cobbing's life-long commitment to sound poetry, an aesthetic so obviously open to ridicule, but with an emotional flexibility that could move with agility between vulnerability, loneliness, ludicrousness, laughter and rage, and in the performance moment so precisely targeted when delivered with unflinching conviction, forces Bonney into a reappraisal. But of what exactly? The open-ended, teasing vagueness of Bonney's 'a lot of things', and 'you know what I mean', is given more shape in a 2006 interview, printed as 'On the Brink of the Articulate' where Bonney states: 'If you look at the work of Bob Cobbing, or at *Finnegans Wake*, then I think what you have, in its exploration of the very edges of writing, is essentially a statement of possibilities, which in itself is revolutionary'.[55] In the noise of Cobbing's poetry and pedagogy one of those statements of possibility became Bonney's *Our Death*.

The 'desires and facts and seizures' that 'flare up from somewhere behind the horizon' in *Our Death* are also a statement of possibilities. Thinking about the speaker's wide-eyed exposure to the hostility of the sun in *Our Death* together with Cobbing's conscious pedagogical decision to open himself up to ridicule through practicing a ludicrous relational aesthetic is to remember that Cobbing (like Bonney) also did his work right up until death. It was an act of complete devotion to poetry even beyond the point of his body's failure. Dutton documents a performance from the last year of Cobbing's life: 'Bob and I did a duo performance in Hugh Metcalfe's free improv music series at The Klinker in north London. Bob needed two canes to get around, and shuffled more than he walked, but his performance lacked nothing.[56] He could only leave the house now to go with Jennifer [Pike Cobbing, Cobbing's partner and a multi-media artist in her own right] by car, but he made it down the stairs to that photocopier to make poems, print books, and run off flyers for readings...'.[57] I hear in Bonney's memory of Cobbing's terrifying face of glee and Cobbing's recruiting of his own infirmity into performance, still screeching, hissing, sighing, laughing, shuffling, moaning, and growling, not only a delineation of techniques but a commitment to

struggle in the face of ineffectuality. In this I hear an embodied version of the aesthetics of powerlessness as a politics set out by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*, glossed by Sianne Ngai in *Our Aesthetic Categories*: 'Society is most active in any artwork when the artwork is most distanced from society and from the realm of social political action. This social ineffectuality or powerlessness...makes all art seem not only undignified but even "ridiculous and clownish"'.[58] Ngai notes how 'the comportment of "ridiculousness" becomes critical for Adorno's more extensive reflections in *Aesthetic Theory* on the aesthetic power *made available* by art's social ineffectuality', and his 'admiration for the "violent kind of delightfulness" exemplified by genres like the circus and slapstick cinema...'[59] To these generic exemplars we could add 'a fairly small but stocky, by that point old man' embracing his own infirmity in a pub as a source of power to sound out new forms of sociality. What could be more ridiculous or undignified? What could be more a condemnation of empirical rationality? In the poem 'Razor Psalm', Bonney – who saw Cobbing perform at the Klinker – also imagines the pub as a site of injured fugitivity located at the end of recognisable music: 'The last song has run out we buried it and died. Now we are turning blue/I think we are in a hospital it is really a bar. Let's call it the felon ward'.[60]

We are now ready to hear the distant rhyme I identified a few paragraphs ago as a couplet, to hear in the shadow of Cobbing's 'terrifying' sound the repellent shapes of Bonney's sun. Perhaps this, in the end, is the true meaning of Andrew Duncan's infamous claim that Cobbing's sound poetry was the 'ugliest noise in the world'?[61] To put it another way, *Our Death* offers a way of reading political content back into Western traditions of sound poetry (embodied in England by Cobbing) which are perhaps too easily dismissed as obsolete relics of a defeated and mistaken avant-garde, ignored because of their vulnerable openness to incomprehensibility or their perceived lack of 'content'. In these terms, Bonney's *Our Death* has an important place within that tradition, perhaps even as part of a further phase of Western sound poetry.

In *Our Death* the speaker also gives emotional form to the idea that irrecuperable strength and insight can be found by rendering oneself (but especially the body) powerless when confronted with uses of technology that are intertwined with capitalist violence. This is from '6/What Teargas is For':

You come to a very real understanding of the nature of things, both visible and invisible, by having your sensory system hijacked and turned against you by a meaningful dose of teargas. It is the anti-Rimbaud. The absolute regulation and administration of all the senses. I mean try it. Next time things are starting to kick off a little bit just go out on the street and run straight into the middle of the biggest cloud of teargas

you can find. Bang. Sight. Taste. Smell. All the rest of them. All turned into confu-
sion, loss of geographical certainty and, most importantly, pain. Don't freak out.
In the centre of that pain is a small and silent point of absolute Unknowing. It is
that Unknowing that the cops – and by extension Charles Windsor – call knowledge.
They want it.[62]

In this poem, sensory experience and its borders – borders that are synaesthetically
explored and exploded in Cobbing's practice – are foregrounded but sacrificially
policed. 'What Teargas is For' is an extreme articulation of Bonney's apparently full
turn away from a poetry of pure sound, a poetry of literal and vocalised shrieks and
hisses, as the speaker tells us to open ourselves up to the 'absolute regulation and
administration of all the senses'. But read this way, the moment of the poem's turn
loudly recalls antagonisms that existed in mid-twentieth century European concrete-
sound poetry, which centred on whether to abandon the word altogether, and it forces
one specific aspect of that genealogy to the surface – Henri Chopin's audio poem *'Mes
Bronches'* (1968):

Exposed to tear gas on the rue Gay-Lussac in May 1968, my eyes itched, my skin
made me fragile, my breath was out of order.

With Jean we could see burning cars provoked by the police rather than by students
who only had their muscles and their paving stones, and this combet [sic] was not
powerful enough to leap over the fires nourished by the "armada" of the CRS.

I recorded between two barricades while coughing my lungs, as a prelude to that
plurality (bronchial tubes, gas, out-of-breath, respiration, fatigue, and tears) which
became a major audio poem for me in the name of Plurality 1.1.1.1. I cut it [the tape
of *'Mes Bronches'*] at the speed of 38 [cm per second] to be listened to at 9.5 [cm per
second]. The side of abyssal depths gave itself up to practice, and I think that this
fixation should be useful to medical examination of air swelling in the body.

First trial at working at the end of 1968, it's thanks to the gas that I knew how to
show it…. Eh! Eh![63]

*'Mes Bronches'* is the sixth and last track that Chopin presents on the B Side of the LP record
included with *Revue OU,* 34–35 (1969) – a sound and poetry journal edited by Chopin –
and it directly follows Cobbing's audio poem 'Marvo Movies Natter' (1968), a context
Bonney points towards by embedding the phrase 'resides in other elements' in 'Through
the Soundhole': 'black noise ::: *resides in other elements* ::: more like itself ::: making the
poem ::: more like itself :::'.[64] A fuller quotation from Cobbing's 1969 statement titled

'The Shape and Size of Poetry', which reflects on his work in relation to Chopin's, give necessary context by helping us understand the meaning of 'resides in other elements':

> My Use of 'vocal-micro-particles' as Henri Chopin calls the elements with which we now compose sound poetry, retains, indeed emphasises, the natural quality of the human voice, more perhaps than Chopin's poetry. But both he and I are attempting to use a new means of communication which I believe is an old method re-established, which is more natural more direct and more honest than, for example, the present day voice of politics and religion. [...] Poetry in these forms is closer to physical being, at least one step nearer to bodily movement. Gone is the word as word, though the word may still be used as sound or shape. Poetry now *resides in other elements*.[65]

Chopin's work and Bonney's form a constellation via the mediating presence of Cobbing and the inhalation of teargas. 'What Teargas is For' is part of a small but significant tradition of teargas poems. When fully formed this tradition would almost certainly include Adrienne Rich's poem 1969 poem 'Tear Gas', which responds to the 'teargassing of demonstrators protesting the treatment of G.I. prisoners in the stockade at Fort Dix, New Jersey'. The poem begins with the lines 'This is how it feels to do something you are afraid of./That they are afraid of'. The poem ends by stating '(I am afraid.)/It's not the worst way to live'.[66]

Critiquing tourists who 'stand outside any clouds of teargas that may appear', in 'Further Notes on Tear Gas', Bonney also identifies 'fear' as the irrecuperable emotional core at the centre of real knowledge which can be arrived at in the face of overwhelming police violence and apparent defeat: 'They talk to the cops without fear of death, but without this fear they will never know or remember a thing'.[67] Bonney, like Cobbing before him, refused to abandon the written word as Chopin demanded – 'Get rid of all those bits of paper, whole, torn, folded, or not. It is man's body that is poetry, and the streets' Chopin wrote – and yet it is Bonney's written words, his urgent desire, shared with Cobbing, 'to create a new communication on all levels of practice', which demands the reappraisal of the word-exceeding, embodied practices that typified Chopin's work and core aspects of Cobbing's.[68] With the 'loss of geographical certainty' produced by teargas and the contemporary realities of its ubiquitous and global use, this reappraisal should not restrict itself to a Western frame. As Adnan writes:

> How can we exorcise malediction when we ourselves are cursed?
> What to do with the sun when it hides behind tear gas?
> Drink it. Drink it in little sips so that tenderness resembles hell.[69]

*The Arab Apocalypse* is a poem which is peppered with wordless glyphs and graphic signs. These can be read as points of unintelligibility, which like teargas, fear, and the sun, are also points of differentiated solidarity: something Adnan, Bonney, Rich and Chopin can share, but experience according to different cultural-geographic and historic vectors. If these vectors could be accounted for, the speaker in *Our Death* would not have to be left alone in their 'confusion' or with their 'pain'. There is a more direct route into solidarity of course, as Bonney, like Cobbing before him, was interested in simple poems: 'run straight into the middle of the biggest cloud of teargas you can find'.

## Alienation, Obsolescence and Contempt

At the conclusion of the epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin argues that 'through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way': gas, as a technological weapon of war, penetrates the human body through the biological necessity of breath, just as film – itself penetrated by the technology of the camera – penetrates us by requisitioning our optical attention.[70] In poem '35/Our Death' we see the camera's penetration of the human body from the vantage point of our alienated present: the product's unfolding, barbaric horizon:

> You walked past a dead man the other day. You think maybe he'd jumped from his balcony, but you don't know. He was lying on the ground and there were people nearby, taking photos of him with their phones You hurried past, went home and tried to make some kind of structure out of whatever it was you were feeling.[71]

With its capacity to record video, the handheld camera-phone is a technology of mechanical reproduction that penetrates our contemporary social body at every point. Even as phones provide a new tool with which to witness and record police violence, phones also work to surveil us, and as a content delivery platform for video they privatise through dispersal what in a previous era would have been film's collective reception. Bonney and Cobbing responded to the technological penetration of their respective presents by looking to resist technology's designed function through an iteration of its functional logic and use. By doing so they locate power in obsolete things. In his contributions to the Destruction in Art Symposium which he organised with Gustav Metzger and others, Cobbing took the 'stencil of the invitation to and the program of … the Symposium' and exaggerated the duplicator's deficiencies to destroy text, with words gradually changing into image through text's repetitive and destructive duplication.[72] This was performed on a machine that was already becoming obsolete. The method was related to Cobbing's belief that poems had an 'internal force of being', which recurrent

versions sought to express and release: 'Once one begins the poem, that poem has an existence in its own right and one is serving the poem, is trying to make it as much like itself as possible', wrote Cobbing.[73] In 'Through the Soundhole' Bonney references Cobbing's statement by weaving the phrase 'much like itself' into the poem in a slightly altered form: 'black noise ::: resides in other elements ::: more like itself ::: making the poem ::: more like itself'.[74] He also recalls Cobbing's participation in the mimeographic revolution of the 1960s in this line: 'to turn the :::/turn the ::: old ::: duplicator ::: handle to ::: turn'.[75] Cobbing used his duplicator to facilitate local art networks and then later as part of an international counterculture. In *Bomb Culture*, Jeff Nuttall records that he and Cobbing 'had no idea that the same thing was happening all over the world' when they swung 'the duplicator handle throughout the long Saturday afternoons of 1963'.[76] Bonney's focus on the means of production, 'the duplicator', rather than on the communities it facilitated, can be related to an argument made by poet and publisher Ken Edwards about small press publications in 1985: 'The products of the presses... are not commodities. In fact, insofar as the labour which made them retains its visibility... they may be designated anti-commodities'.[77] The obsolescence of the commodity – in this case the duplicator – is a variety of destruction upon which capitalism depends and built-in-obsolescence is capitalism's way of profiting from that dependency. Bonney was alert to the anti-capitalist orientation of Cobbing's visual poetry techniques that were developed in the shadow of a 'bomb culture', the apocalyptic near reality of a global nuclear war, to interrogate a culture obsessed with recording and repetition. In describing a 'repetitive economy', our 'society of repetition', Attali ominously notes that 'the nuclear powers have stockpiled the means to destroy the planet several times over'.[78] In a commodity culture characterised by mass-production that privileges stockpiling over use, the recorded over the live, and where power is delocalised and 'spread across different elements of the system' (to quote Attali) Cobbing argued (in 1974) that there were many ways of 'making a poem more like itself', including making 'visual, sound, spatial, and even choreographic versions of the poem'.[79] This, which can be characterised as Cobbing's poetic model of code-switching through repetition, is another aspect that is translated and carried forward by Bonney into *Our Death*: 'You wander across an imaginary landscape hollering some implausible songs. Inside those songs are dance moves. Inside those dance moves are diagrams and systems'.[80] In order to confront power in its delocalised, decentralised forms one's poetry also needs to be able to exist in and draw upon as many expressive forms as possible.

In 'poem 35/Our Death' the human being, the discourse of a previous photographic age and the poem itself, are triangulated as obsolete forms available to the poet. They are then presented as, to borrow Raymond Williams' phrase, a 'structure of feeling',

to resist the violence of capitalist life.[81] Bonney uses two techniques borrowed from photography: the reproduction of multiple images from a negative, and the making of separate bodies into a single composite image. Both these techniques are translated into literary ones. 'You walked past a dead man the other day' is an image of a cancelled humanity.[82] Across that body, the poem reproduces the negative image of its opening line, three times. It does this through analepsis and prolepsis: 'There was a moment before he jumped and there was a moment after and both of those moments were the same moment'.[83] It does this through altered repetition: 'You walked past a man lying face down on the pavement'.[84] It does this through apophasis: 'In three hours time you will walk down six flights of stairs and cross the street and pass him again and no there will be noone [*sic*] there. No body. Not a trace of blood or drool'.[85] Together these rhetorical reproductions create discord with the dead man's multiply reproduced image on the spectators' phones. The motivating feeling is a care hinged on contempt. Care is registered in the second reproduction by emphasising the man's humanity: no longer described as 'dead' we are also told about his 'face'. Contempt (and agency) is also registered in the way he withholds his face from us (this 'us' includes the speaker, the reader and those taking photographs) and in the speaker's visceral description of the man as a 'sackful of blood and brain and distance and imagination and despair'.[86] In 'Adorno's Mimeograph: The Uses of Obsolescence in *Minima Moralia*', Joel Burges nuances Adorno's account of the affective qualities produced by the commodity's obsolescence by arguing that embarrassment and contempt should take the place of hate and shame in Adorno's diagnosis. He quotes the early work of the affect theorist Silvan Tomkins who 'proposes that the purpose of contempt is "to maximize the distance between the face and the object which disgusts the self. It is a literal pulling away from the object."' For Tomkins, 'the signature expression of this affect is on the face'.[87] In Bonney's poem the speaker pulls away from the obsolete dead man when he hurries past them, but he shows care by returning to them to distance his face from us. Through his reproductions the speaker creates a composite body which culminates in the construction of a fictional and impossible body, when the missing half of the dead man's skull, figured as the sky, rains inside the speaker's mouth: 'Your mouth was filled with rain. You said to yourself, the missing half of his skull is the sky, and somewhere inside it is the center of our earth'.[88]

This fictional composite is an old photographic technique translated into an image of imagined solidarity. The critic Daniel Novak notes that in the early history of photography realist photographic images were created through the combination of figures from different images. This was done, he argues, to 'mimic the aesthetic standards of painting', and to respond 'to a generalized sense that ordinary photographs

were not "realistic"' as they failed 'to capture individuality or identity'.[89] By combining parts of one photo with another to overcome this deficiency 'photographers blurred the boundry between realism and fiction', but this wasn't the end goal as the photographers argued that these 'photographic fictions' were both '*more* realistic and *more* photographic'.[90] To put this argument in Cobbing's terms, photography became 'more like itself' the more it became fictional and photographic. By combining his mouth with the dead man's skull and the centre of the earth, Bonney's unphotographable fiction borrows from this forgotten photographic discourse to make death as 'much like itself' as possible; to distance death from its alienated life on the camera phones of those passing by. At its conclusion, the poem becomes more x-ray than photograph, in order to secure for death another kind of life:

> No body. Not a trace of blood or drool. No borders. But his bones will be there for ever. And you will say you only care for trapped things, falling invisibly, un-photographed and un-named. These offices of bones. These cities and these deserts. All taken by the earthquake.[91]

Looking out from this clean point of oblivion which is 'Our Death', we have travelled a long way from Cobbing and from Bonney's poem which was *for* him: so far in fact that Cobbing's sound and visual poetry produced on office machinery of a previous technological era might feel like obsolete work by comparison. It is conceivable given his scepticism about sound poetry that it felt this way to Bonney and that, at times, he was embarrassed by it. Nevertheless, thinking about the conjunctions between Cobbing and Bonney encourages a kind of counter-historical thinking that reanimates life under capitalism which is hostile to it.

## A Conclusion: Cobbing, Bonney and Anti-Thatcherism

The counter-narrative provided by Writers Forum was important to Bonney as it helped him understand his poetry as part of a tradition that was able to survive within hostile territory. It also taught him by example how to welcome other poets into artistic community, which he did with great ability and generosity. Even though Bonney did not go to Writers Forum as much after Cobbing died, and in the last five years of his life not at all, in 2010 he still responded to the question, 'what do you think Writers Forum's importance is, if it is important?' with positivity:

> It's been a source [...] of people who are very important in British poetry outside of a mainstream, in a more, I don't know what you'd call it, counter-cultural, but

still high quality, poetry world, since the 60s: Lee Harwood did his first publications with Writers Forum, there was Jeff Nuttall; then you go into the 70s you've got [...] Bill Griffiths, cris cheek; Maggie O'Sullivan in the 80s; Robert Sheppard, Geraldine Monk, Peter Manson, Scott Thurston, Jeff Hilson, um, you know me [*Bonney laughs*]. When you start actually making a list of the poets who have been through Writers Forum, and that's just the people who are physically at the workshop, because it was also important [...] knowing that they'd [...] published Allen Ginsberg and John Cage and bpNicholl, and all these other people. [...] I mean, that list is stunning.[92]

The politics of welcome, community and poetic form encoded within this genealogy are important to an understanding of Bonney's later work even though he found other communal formations to nourish him, and even after his poetry departed from the visually arresting style of *Baudelaire in English* to the sonnets of *The Commons* and to the prose blocks of *Letters Against the Firmament* and *Our Death.* To see this, we need to appreciate how the wild line that connects Cobbing to Bonney is buckled and stressed, perhaps no more so than by the hostile presence of Margaret Thatcher.

Thatcher appears as a rancid, elemental stain in Bonney's poetry: 'the gaps in your voice/smoke of the bottomless pit/idiots of sulphur/o bollocks/there goes Thatcher again'.[93] That was from *The Commons.* She appears as a stain within language in *Letters*: 'Guess it's nice that we won't have to pronounce the syllables Margaret Thatcher again'.[94] Then finally, she appears as a stain on the laws of life in *Our Death*: 'Everybody knows that Thatcher faked her death'.[95] Thatcher also makes an early appearance in Bonney's poetry as a libidinal stain in 'Through the Soundhole':

> MY LIFE IN A HOLE IN A soundflow ::: wavecrash red ::: throat o SEA wavesound ::: wordblow ::: *its all sperm its* ::: word toss and scatter ::: noise ingested ::: throttle star :::[.][96]

Cobbing recalled that when 'Prime-Minister-to-be Margaret Thatcher, came into the [Finchley] library' in the early 1960s, she decided that one of his paintings was 'obscene', and that when the 'librarian asked her what was obscene about the painting, she replied: "It's all sperm"'.[97] Bonney *détournes* Thatcher's moralistic judgement by ingesting it as 'noise', swallowing word, sound, and sperm, in a kind of homoerotic, poetic blowjob, to honour Cobbing's life in poetry and as a pivot to his own, just as he urges us to breathe in teargas in *Our Death.* Yet the trajectory of their collective sixty-year project to counter Thatcherism does not just move forward in time. In 'Letter Against Ritual', Bonney responds to Thatcher's public funeral by focussing on noise's antonym:

> But seriously, what was that thing they were dragging through the streets on April 17th, or whatever day it was. Through that silenced, terrified city. I thought of Thatcher as some kind of rancid projectile, and they were firing her back into time, and the reverberations from wherever it was she landed, probably some time in around 1946, were clearly a more-or-less successful attempt to erase everything that wasn't in a dull, harmonic agreement with whatever it is those razorhead vampire suckworms in parliament are actually trying to do with us.[98]

Seizing onto Cobbing, as Bonney does in 'Through the Soundhole', whilst listening out for Thatcher's reverberating corpse in 'around 1946', constelles four events: 1) the beginning of the Welfare State and a post-1945 understanding of culture and education as fashioned from the same ideological scaffold as the other significant welfare institutions; 2) the racist and patriarchal post-war policies of state sponsored mass migration; 3) the displacement and internment of several of Cobbing's most significant European artistic collaborators; and 4), the hanging at HM Prison Pentonville on 4 January 1946 of Theodore Schurch, a member of the British Union of Fascists, the only British soldier executed for treachery committed during World War II, and the last person to be executed in Britain for an offence other than murder. These are the historic conditions of production out of which Bonney's poetry emerges and which that same poetry now brings to light.

In the figure of the refugee the borders of the individual body and the borders of vocalisation become aligned with the borders of nation states, the walls of prisons and of camps. In *Our Death* this alignment allows for sentences like:

> I kept screaming, past all voice, all body, all of my borders.[99]

> Draw as many borders as you can, across the various states of his body.
> Fill his mouth with contraband. Take his borders. Contravene them.[100]

> That you are disturbed by the hatred continually emitting from the drawer in which you keep your passport. It is important they understand that hatred's foul metellic shriek is in no way connected with the way in which you would like to conduct your business.[101]

These sentences name the refugee crisis of our time. They also name a moment when articulations that pushed at the borders of speech, language and image were produced by previously interned and displaced European poets and artists in the aftermath of the Second World War. Listing some of the experiences of these artists will help us understand the long tradition out of which Bonney began to work when he arrived at

Writers Forum (but on which he is largely silent). Cobbing was a conscientious objector and did not experience first-hand the trauma of displacement or imprisonment, but his own sound and visual poetry emerged alongside, and was in deep sympathy with, these artists. Henri Chopin, born to a Jewish family, was captured in 1940 by the German army and held in a forced labour camp. Able to escape, he was later recaptured and then sent on a Nazi 'death march'. Gustav Metzger, born to Polish Jewish parents, came to Britain in 1939 as a refugee under the auspices of the Refugee Children Movement. He lost his Polish citizenship, was rendered stateless, and was later imprisoned by the British state. Polish filmmakers and artists, Franciszka and Stefan Themerson, moved to Paris in 1938, and then with the outbreak of war were compelled to move to 49 Randolph Avenue, London (Franciszka in 1940, Stefan in 1942). In late 1964 they became near neighbours with Cobbing when he himself moved to 262 Randolph Avenue. Austrian poet Ernst Jandl was conscripted into the German army at the age of 18. Neither a Nazi nor a victim of Nazi persecution, he was still interned during the war in an American prisoner-of-war camp in Stockbridge, England. Over the course of his life Cobbing heard each of these artists through publication, performance, or collaboration, and in doing so contributed to their understanding, and our understanding, of what was necessary and possible in the decades that followed the War. Bonney is also silent on this aspect of Writers Forum's work, but a passage in *Our Death* suggests he would not object to being placed within a tradition of sound poetry on this basis. After reading from Hugo Ball's diaries (Ball was a second-generation sound poet) the speaker of the poem dreams himself into the non-human form of a 'hunted, carnivorous animal', and reports: 'I wake up, still thinking about Hugo Ball who, of course, was a draft resister, a refugee. I find that a lot more interesting than whatever happened with his "sound poetry"'.[102] The invitation here is to think about the aesthetic category 'sound poetry' as inseparable from the politics of the nation state, the way it treats people as animals, surveils and/or excludes them.

Given this invitation, and the policies of the 'Hostile Environment' still being in effect in the UK, it is important to state that despite the recognition Writers Forum gave to Metzger, Chopin and others, these artists and poets were predominantly white, European and male, and to this extent Cobbing was never able to significantly overcome the systematically racist and patriarchal borders that also defined his time. As Kathleen Paul has argued, exclusionary policies which worked in the service of a racially coded and colonial understanding of national identity pitted white, male European displaced non-citizens over the migration of its own legally entitled citizens of colour from the West Indies.[103] Culture was far from untouched by these politics. On 9 August 1946, while the British State was responding to labour shortages with mass migration policies

that were driven by colonial anxieties, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was granted a Royal Charter and reconstituted as the Arts Council of Great Britain. With the state funding of the arts secured, the cultural sphere became a site, as Lauren Kruger puts it, where 'the supremacy lost by Britain in its economic and political spheres' in the process of its 'post-imperial devolution' was 'reasserted'.[104] In this moment, the divisive politics of the state subsidy of the arts came together with the divisive politics of empire. Alan Sinfield calls the postwar situation of state-sponsored cultural provision 'welfare-capitalism' and defines it as a pact: 'Capital produces most of the wealth, but the people are protected against and compensated for its disadvantages by a state-instituted welfare system, and by state intervention in the economy to secure full employment'.[105] This was the context in which Cobbing made his first significant forays into arts organising, poetry and visual art. Given this divisive climate where the disadvantages of capitalism were both unequally experienced and racially coded, it is significant that the Jamaican-born poet James Berry, who came to Britain in September 1948, shortly after The Empire Windrush, credits his beginnings in poetry to his attendance at Hendon Writers' Circle, a group that was established by Cobbing in the early 1950s, and which in 1958 became Writers Forum.[106] Berry was one of the earliest writers to use Jamaican vernacular – often called Nation language – in his poetry, and his attendance at Writers Forum, is an unrealised moment within the history of British sound poetry (and Writers Forum more specifically) where refugee poets and artists fleeing war in Europe might have entered into dialogue with migrants from the West Indies in and through their differing organisations and patternings of sound. For reasons that are being addressed in important, ongoing scholarship by Matt Martin, this cross-cultural dialogue never fully developed. Rather, in the evolution of Cobbing's work, we see his enthusiasm, confusion, then wakeful struggle as he confronted the pain of living within an ideological and socio-political framework that was offensively compromised from the very start (but under which he nevertheless strived to live). The fragmentation of welfare-capitalism accelerated under Thatcherism and intersected (as the Commonwealth became of less strategic importance) with a hardening stance towards refugees, and a legislative clarification of racist policies that had been pursued at least since the end of the Second World War. To give one example: when the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees in Britain asked Britain to take in 10,000 refugees who had fled Vietnam after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, Thatcher told her foreign and home secretaries that it was 'quite wrong that immigrants should be given council housing whereas white citizens were not' and 'that she had far less objection to refugees, such as Rhodesians, Poles and Hungarians, since they could more easily be assimilated into British society'.[107] In the transition from Cobbing's late poetry to Bonney's, and in

the correspondences that this article has mapped between 'Through the Soundhole' and *Our Death*, we hear the drawn-out disintegration of the welfare state and a refusal of its ideological and cultural frameworks. We also glimpse the fascistic formations that were waiting to emerge and their effects on the human beings who endure them.

In our times of resurgent fascism (to borrow the title of Will Rowe's excellent book) we need Bonney's poetry and the clarity of its enunciations.[108] We need it to hear the political content in the sometimes illegible and near-incomprehensible articulations of the second and third-generation sound and visual poets who emerged from 1916 onwards. They were also trying to make sound travel beyond the borders of the individual, the camp, and the state, and there may still be things we can learn from them. Many of these artist-poets continued to make sounds and images up until their deaths, but the politics of those sounds can sometimes feel muted and dulled by the divisive politics of their day and the urgency of ours. Yet, Cobbing heard those sounds, and Cobbing's sounds found Bonney. In his word-based clarity, Bonney refuses the loud scream of sound poetry, but from the perspective of Chopin who experienced Facism up close, this clarity places Bonney's work in a position of grave vulnerability, not privilege: 'Paper can be controlled', Chopin wrote: 'Paper can be directed, paper can be suppressed, paper can be analysed'.[109] We need the vulnerable lucidity of Bonney's predominantly page-based poetry – which grants to the figure of the sun in *Our Death* a hostile and sorrowful non-human, but silent, scream – to help us understand how we might one day exceed the dehumanising politics of our day and the racially divisive politics of the past. For our day is marked by a climate catastrophe which worsened and noticeably accelerated after the Second World War. Our day: the cause of so many displacements.[110] With Bonney we follow Thatcher's corpse back to 1946 to be reminded of a day when the state hung a fascist, yet still we are encouraged to imagine a different and better trajectory. Our day with Sean Bonney at the soundhole.

## Notes

[1] Steve McCaffery, 'From Phonic to Sonic: The Emergence of the Audio-Poem' *in Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies* ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), (149–169), 149. McCaffery identifies three phases in Western Sound poetry, situating Cobbing in the third phase. The first phase is described as 'the paleotechnic era of sound poetry ... the vast, intractable territory of archaic and primitive poetries, the many instances of chant structures and incantation, of syllabic mouthings and deliberate lexical distortions...'.

[2] George Revill, 'Music and the Politics of Sound: Nationalism, Citizenship and Auditory Space' in *Environment and Planning D: Society and* Space, 2000; 18 (5): 597–613.

[3] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 13th edn. trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 19.

[4] Bob Cobbing, *Shrieks & Hisses, Collected Poems Volume 16* (Buckfastleigh: Etruscan Books, 1999), 1.

[5] Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, 6.

[6] Adam Gabbatt and Paul Lewis, 'Student protests: video shows mounted police charging London crowd' in *The Guardian*, 26 November, 2010 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/26/police-student-protests-horses-charge> [accessed 01 February, 2022].

[7] Cahal Milmo, 'IPCC admits it wrongly said Duggan fired at police' in *The Independent*, 13 August, 2011 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/ipcc-admits-it-wrongly-said-duggan-fired-at-police-2336856.html> [accessed 01 February, 2022].

[8] Sean Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), 35.

[9] Sean Bonney, *Our Death* (Oakland: Commune Editions, 2019), 67–73.

[10] David Grundy, 'Sean Bonney's Life Work', <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2020/03/sean-bonneys-life-work> [accessed 28 March, 2021].

Keston Sutherland, 'Sean Bonney's Hate Poems', *Post 45*, 2. (2019) <https://post45.org/2019/07/sean-bonneys-hate-poems/> [accessed 28 March, 2021].

[11] Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament*, 34.

[12] Attali, *Noise*, 27.

[13] 'For Bob, Cobbing Through the Soundhole, Where Cobbing IS', *Blade Pitch Control Unit (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), 23.*

[14] *For Bob Cobbing*, ed. Adrian Clarke, Lawrence Upton (London: Mainstream Poetry, 23 September, 2000). Given that the contributions were compiled as a surprise for Cobbing the publisher is named 'Mainstream Poetry' but in intention and design this is a Writers Forum publication.

[15] Paul Dutton, 'Viewed from His Workroom Floor: A Personal Perspective on Bob Cobbing (1920 – 2002)' *The Thing* <http://www.thing.net/~grist/ld/DTTN-COB.HTM> [accessed 28 March, 2021].

[16] Sean Bonney interviewed by Steve Willey, *The Sound of Writers Forum* (London: Openned, 2010) <htttp://vimeo.com/10203751> [accessed 20 March 2021]. The section quoted did not make the final cut.

[17] Bonney, *Letters Against the Firmament* (London: Enitharmon, 2015), 38.

[18] Ibid., 38.

[19] Bonney, *Our Death*, 68. 'My grief which is the size of the tiny racist island on which I was born, I compress it, I transmute it into something like the wild and collectively inhuman joy of the swifts...'.

[20] For a performance of this poem see <https://vimeo.com/374941672> [accessed 15 March 2021].

[21] 'The Ciliary Body' <https://entokey.com/the-ciliary-body/> [accessed 20 March, 2021].

[22] Sean Bonney, in *For Bob Cobbing* (no page).

[23] Bonney, *Our Death*, 78, 92, 110.

[24] Walter Benjamin, '*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*', trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston; New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 196–210, (201).

[25] *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) online [accessed 15 March 2021].

[26] Bonney, *Abandoned Buildings* <http://abandonedbuildings.blogspot.com/> [accessed 15 March 2021].

[27] Bonney, *Our Death*, 29.

[28] William Blackstone *Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books*, vol.1 (1753) on *The Online Library of Liberty* <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/sharswood-commentaries-on-the-laws-of-england-in-four-books-vol-1 [accessed 05 August 2022].

[29] *OED* online [accessed 15 March 2021].

[30] Bonney, 'On the Brink of the Articulate', Sean Bonney interviewed by Tim Allen in *Don't Start Me Talking* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), 34–53, (43).

[31] Ibid., 43.

[32] Bonney, 'The *Is* ::: Occupied Territory : Anger Is An Energy', *Pores*, Issue 2 (2002) <http://www.pores.bbk.ac.uk/2/bonney.htm> [accessed 15 March, 2021].

[33] Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, trans. Edward Aveling (London, Swan Sonnenschien, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), 75. [my italics].

[34] Bonney, *Our Death*, 61.

[35] Bonney, *Blade Pitch*, 23.

[36] Attali, *Noise*, 11.

[37] Ibid., 11.

[38] Bonney, *Our Death*, 79,83, 84, 88.

[39] Bonney, *Our Death*, 83.

40  Bonney, *Our Death*, 84.

41  Bonney, *Our Death*, 110.

42  Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 3rd edn. (The Post Apollo Press, 2020). Adnan's poem was originally written in French in 1980, as *L'Apocalypse arabe*, and translated by the author into English in 1989.

43  Aditi Machado, 'On Etel Adnan's "The Arab Apocalypse"', *Jacket 2* <https://jacket2.org/article/etel-adnans-arab-apocalypse> [accessed 20 March, 2021].

44  Bonney, *Our Death*, 110.

45  Machado, 'On Etel', Op Cit.

46  Ibid.

47  Bonney, *Our Death*, 110.

48  Machado, 'On Etel', Op Cit.

49  Bonney, *Our Death*, 110.

50  Bonney, *The Sound of Writers Forum*

51  Bob Cobbing, *Kontextsound*, ed. Michael Gibbs, April/May, 1977, 15–19, (19). <https://monoskop.org/images/1/1d/Kontextsound_Stedelijk_1977.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2021].

52  Cobbing, *Kontextsound*, 19.

53  Bonney, *Our Death*, 58.

54  Cobbing, *Kontextsound*, 19.

55  Bonney, 'On the Brink of the Articulate', in *Don't Start Me Talking*, 47.

56  More information about The Klinker can be found at www.klinkerclub.com/about.

57  Dutton, 'Viewed from His Workroom Floor'.

58  Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2015), 103.

59  Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 103.

60  Bonney, *Our Death*, 16. Bonney, 'On the Brink of the Articulate': 'So I moved to London, started going to Writers Forum, attending SubVoicive readings, as well as going to places like the Klinker. Suddenly I found myself in a community, befriending poets that I could respect, and look up to, and learn from (which continues). And so the way in which I understood the possibilities of writing was transformed. But that meant starting again. It was a year zero experience, in which the earlier work was only valid in the sense that it had enabled me to get where I was at that point'.

61  Adrian Clarke, 'Conversation about Writers Forum, Arnaud Desjardin and Adrian Clarke', *Boooook: The Life and Work of Bob Cobbing*, ed. William Cobbing and Rosie Cooper (London: Occasional Papers, 2015), 36–42 (36).

62  Bonney, *Our Death*, 73.

63 Henri Chopin, '*Mes Bronches*', OU 42/43/44 (1973), '*OU – Cinquième Saison*', book insert included with *OU Sound Poetry: An Anthology* (CD box set, Alga Marghen, 2006), 21. English translation by Philip Corner.

64 Bonney, *Blade Pitch*, 23.

65 Bob Cobbing, 'Some Statements on Concrete Sound Poetry, *Boooook*, 182–187 (183).

66 Adrienne Rich, 'Tear Gas' in *Poems Selected and New 1950–1974* (New York: Norton, 1975), 140.

67 *Our Death*, 97.

68 Henri Chopin, 'Concrete Poetry?', *Stereo Headphones* ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg, 1:2 (1970), n.p.

69 Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 49.

70 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 166–196 (195).

71 Bonney, *Our Death*, 111.

72 Cobbing, *Lame Limping Mangled Marred and Mutilated: Collected Poems Volume 9* (London: David Barton, 1986), n.p.

73 Cobbing, *Ballet of the Speech Organs*: *Bob Cobbing on Bob Cobbing*, ed. Steven Ross Smith (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1998), 6.

74 Bonney, *Blade Pitch*, 23.

75 Ibid., 23.

76 Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1968, 2nd ed. 1970), 161.

77 Ken Edwards quoted in Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying, British Poetry and it Discontents, 1950–2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 38.

78 Attali, *Noise*, 126.

79 Attali, *Noise*, 90 and Cobbing, in *Bob Cobbing & Writers Forum*, ed. Peter Mayer (writers Forum, December 1999), 59.

80 Bonney, *Our Death*, 121.

81 Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.132.

82 Ibid., 111.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Silvan Tomkins quoted in Joel Burges, 'Adorno's Mimeograph: The Uses of Obsolescence in "*Minima Moralia*"'. *New German Critique*, no. 118, 2013, (65–92), 79. [accessed 29 Mar. 2021]

88 Bonney, *Our Death*, 111.

89 Daniel A. Novak, 'Labors of Likeness: Photography and Labor in Marx's 'Capital.'' *Criticism*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2007, 125–150. 126. [Accessed 31 Mar. 2021]

90 Ibid., 127.

91 Bonney, *Our Death*, 111.

92 Bonney, *The Sound of Writers Forum*. Quoted section did not make the final cut.

93 Sean Bonney, *The Commons* (London: Openned, 2011), 21.

94 Bonney, *Letters*, 98.

95 Bonney, *Our Death*, 70.

96 Bonney, *Blade Pitch*, 23.

97 Bob Cobbing *Ballet of the Speech Organs*, 6.

98 Bonney, *Letters*, 98.

99 Bonney, *Our Death*, 88.

100 Ibid., 80.

101 Ibid., 77.

102 *Our Death*, p. 98.

103 Kathleen Paul, '"British Subjects" and "British Stock": Labour's Postwar Imperialism', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1995), 233–276.

104 Loren Kruger, '"Our National House": The Ideology of the National Theatre of Great Britain' *Theatre Journal* Vol. 39, No. 1, 'Theatrical Perception: Decay of the Aura' (Mar., 1987), 35–50, (35).

105 Alan Sinfield, *Literature Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: The Athlone Press. 1997), 20.

106 James Berry's attendance at Writers Forum is pieced together by Chris Beckett in 'Bob Cobbing, Visual Art Works (1942–73): A Preliminary Survey' (2012) <eBLJ Article 7, 2012 V1:eBLJ Article>, 8. [accessed 22 February 2022].

107 Alan Travis 'Margaret Thatcher reluctant to give boat people refuge in Britain', *The Guardian*, 30 December 2009 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/dec/30/thatcher-snub-vietnamese-boat-people> [accessed 15 March 2022].

108 Will Rowe, *Poetry in Times of Resurgent Fascism* (Surrey, London: Veer Books, 2020).

109 Henri Chopin, *Kontextsound*, 11.

110 Some of the thinking in this conclusion is indebted to David Herd and Stephen Collis, 'Making Space for the Human: Rights, the Anthropocene and Recognition', *European Journal of American Culture*, Volume 39, Number 1, 2020. 10.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.