

COMBATIDA TERNURA: BOYD NIELSON AND RICHARD OWENS

The following exchange, which emerges out of an ongoing correspondence with Boston-based poet-activist Boyd Nielson, elaborates on a variety of questions presently in circulation concerning the articulation of poetry, political economy and activism. Conducted by email, as time allowed, from late-August through mid-October 2013. —RO

BN: Let me begin here with an affirmation that won't sound like one: As poets and communists we surrender poetry's exceptional resources of thought and feeling at our own peril. That claim demands an analysis of the contradictory insecurity of poetic work (as precarious labor and collective risk) that I expect not to be able to address fully. I'll try to be brief. Earlier you had mentioned to me Neruda's "combatida ternura" as a potential jumping-off point, from the invocation to Spain in *Tercera residencia*: "sí machacada piedra, combatida ternura / de trigo, cuero y animal ardiendo." It is at what follows that "sí," which itself follows a negation, "no diadema," where I'll try to start. The Neruda that is lauded in the United States, as you know, is primarily a love poet; the poetry that sells is the very early Neruda and the late Neruda. But for the poets of Chile, at least, Neruda's reputation rests almost entirely on *Residencia en la tierra* and *Canto general*. And, as we know, the third volume of *Residencia* represents, if not a break in, at least an intensification of the political fibers of Neruda's language.

One challenging argument I encountered at the Howard Zinn lecture series in Occupy Boston—which was made possible only through the indefatigable work of comrades here—was Bruno Bosteels's speech in which he cites Neruda as articulating a collective "we" that refuses the contemporary injunction to speak only for oneself. If there is anything really provocative about Bosteels's claim, it is that it interrupts the conventional arguments on Neruda's Stalinism by making us confront what communist collectively even could mean at the moment. It is a provocative thesis in view of the way Neruda has been criticized by many of the (by now established) Leftist-leaning poets who came after him, Parra, Lihn, etc. who rejected the hierarchy of the so-called cult of personality of the later Neruda in favor rather of the hermetic language of *Residencia*. One notable exception is Raúl Zurita. In an interview somewhere he says that what Neruda did in *Canto general* (and specifically in "Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu") was to turn the full resources of the Spanish language against the legacy of the conquest. It is as if the language were speaking and not the man, he says. He goes on, but what I draw from this is that for Zurita Neruda offers an example of how poetic imagination can open unprecedented possibilities for an outright attack on even the temporality of imperial domination.

My interest in these claims is that in spirit they stand in opposition to a strain of thought that is currently fashionable in the United States, one that I take as in part the legacy of Anglo-American philosophy. It is a typical move among American theorists to claim that someone or something that has been read as politically radical is complicit in and in fact central to the thing it opposes; that sounds like a deconstructionist move, but it is not quite, since it is meant to mark those positions as contained within a larger historical context that operates with its own totalizing logic. And, insofar as it offers no politics except, at best, inoffensive temporizing, it ends up blocking rational communist critique that is inconceivable without division. The lines from Neruda we are beginning with, after all, themselves begin by separating no from yes: "no diadema / sí machacada piedra, combatida ternura / de trigo, cuero y animal ardiendo." At the

contemporary moment, I think the greatest obstacle to communists who are also poets is hardly their overblown sympathetic attachments. Surely a greater danger comes from those who mimic the police by deploying the move I named above as a mode of discipline or domination, especially against those who may be younger or whose influence is less secure. In the last few decades in academia, which is where poets today can't help but operate, even tangentially, the system has tended to promote superstar intellectuals. There is enormous freedom granted to those who move into its highest rungs, but the reverse is true for comrades who do not. The problem extends beyond the theoretical plane. I think we need to risk better, more militant modes of refuge to amplify not only imaginative communist creations but also the precarious consequences of political interventions as such.

I think a rational assessment of poetry's errancy recognizes that poetry is made possible by conditions of thought that will always be external to it, but I do not think every imaginative leap within capitalism is a leap for capital. Neruda never lived to see the end of capital, nor did Vallejo. I'm not sure that it matters, insofar as they were committed to, in Vallejo's words (written about the same period as Neruda's *Tercera residencia*), "la dirección del agua que corre a ver su límite antes que arda."

RO: Odd that you mention the need to magnify imaginative formations. A few months ago my eyes started going. Nothing at all remarkable, just the onset of an embarrassingly mild farsightedness, an inability to focus clearly on objects or texts held close to the eye. In order to bring the details of a text into focus—to sharpen the hazy shape of serifs, loops and stems so I could actually make sense of the illegible characters I was struggling to read—I found myself having to move print objects *away* from my eye, in effect rendering the characters, the text, smaller, more distant, but paradoxically sharper. And I didn't first notice how poor my vision was until I misread the phrase "combatida ternura." I transcribed the phrase in a message to a friend as "combatida temura"—not T-E-R-N-U-R-A but T-E-M-U-R-A—a humiliating error I quickly recognized as far more than a mere typo. There is no such a word as *temura* in Spanish. But among Kabbalists, *Temurah* is a generative reading strategy, a practice motivated by the desire to locate new or latent meanings in old things. Fucking word jumble or a sort of procedural philological practice. In any case, I think the phrase "combatida ternura," as it appears in the opening lines of Neruda's "España en el Corazon," is worth puzzling over. Militant tenderness. This is how the phrase is typically translated, no? But *combatir*, the root verb of the descriptive participle linked to *ternura*, tenderness, seems in the Spanish formulation to suggest an aggression, even an adversarial violence, far more intense than any valence of militancy (*militancia*) is capable of offering. This tenderness is achieved through combat not militancy. This tenderness is a violently amplified, hardened tenderness. But this tenderness, tempered by conflict and struggle, has already happened—that is, *combatida* is not merely a qualifying participle, but at once a passive and also a past participle. This feels somehow important. The tenderness Neruda describes with the qualifying adjective *combatida* has, on one hand, already been fought for, and it does not belong to the narrator of the poem but is a tenderness belonging to "trigo, cuero y animal ardiendo" ("wheat, hide and burning animal"). On the other hand, this tenderness has been passively conditioned by violence. The tenderness belonging to wheat, hide and burning animal—burning animal!—has not been willfully summoned by these things, these degraded objects. These objects, particularly the suffering animal, in effect objectified and denigrated labor, are not simply active agents who call into

being the violent tenderness they have fought for. These burning animals are also passive objects whose violent tenderness has been paradoxically compelled by external historical conditions.

I prefer the term socialist to communist for a variety of reasons that are likely beyond the scope of this dialog, but, man, when you say that we, as poets and communists, stand to lose a great deal when we surrender the staggering range of poetry's affective and intellectual resources in favor of a narrow and arguably naïve imagining of street-level activism, I find myself in total agreement. I would also add that, as history amply demonstrates, the most committed activists, however deeply we might admire many of them, are only in the rarest of instances interesting poets. So we begin with what I believe to be an absolutely vital contradiction. To put it crudely, the most meaningful poetry, the best art, the strongest writing, has always been sound bourgeois practice, especially but most elusively in the case of poetries underwritten by a Marxist ethos. Fortunately, capitalism tends toward manufacturing its own coroners, if not its gravediggers, and so conducting autopsies will always be regarded as an essential, thoroughly political activity.

I say this to keep from deluding myself. Activism will not make us better poets. Activism simply makes us better activists. But if we take up the role of activist, or imagine ourselves as such, what exactly do we stand to lose when we concede the emotive and intellectual potentialities latent within poetry to the culture industry, the university industry, to high-powered poetry brokers philanthropically fueled by big pharma cash? Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, almost as a sort of aside, "Language itself is the product of a community, just as it is in another respect itself the *presence* of the community, a presence which goes without saying." There's no doubt a good deal to say about the larger passage this comes from, but what strikes me now is the word *presence*. The word Marx uses—and most translators, i.e. Martin Nicolaus and S.W.

Ryazanskaya, have tended to note this—is *Dasein*. I know we're both more or less familiar with the enormous body of scholarship around this concept, particularly Heidegger's usage, and so it might seem a little banal to call any attention to it at all, but in Marx's usage the concept is, following Hegel, infused with a sense of quality and value, and this is something I believe worth acknowledging. Language in this formulation embodies and discloses the quality of a community. Language is not the essence of a community but is instead a salient and historically conditioned bellwether given to instabilities and fluctuations which determine, if only in part, the unfolding quality, the active value, of a community. As such it remains a site of struggle, but for it to be so it must be approached strategically, as one site among many whose differential force will by turns and under specific conditions lend to it the force of priority at particular moments just as this same differential force will diminish the strategic significance of language at other times. The diminishing window of time beginning with the economic collapse of 2008 and moving through the Arab Spring, the moment of occupation in the Anglophone world, etc.—this may very well be a moment when the strategic significance of language and thus poetry pales against some urgent imagining of action direct or otherwise, but I also believe, contra Debord, in divisions of interest and labor. Debord thought the division of labor was the devil, and his distaste for divisions of labor is obviously linked with a contemporaneously nascent desire among intellectuals for academic interdisciplinarity. But who in their right mind could imagine figures like, say, Prynne or Denise Riley—poets long invested in thinking class politics and political economy on the terrain of poetry—taking to the streets as others so readily do? Totality is not across-the-board sameness, social justice is not reducible to parceling out the same amount

of wheat to every household, and there is always room for a richly differentiated variety of tactics and strategies in any given struggle.

When poetry is dismissed out of hand by activists what climbs in through the back door is the inverse of the old disavowal of economic determinism. Following from the cultural turn academic and intellectual attention shifted away not only from Marxism but the dialectic as such. And we know this narrative well. After Foucault dialectical thinking was reductively identified with binary logics, theorizations of totality were implicated as fascist and, while parachuting into Marx and wrenching this or that concept in order to Franken-stitch it into the fabric of a more fashionable, seemingly less antiquated philosophical system carried some measure of academic respectability, regarding oneself as a Marxist without qualifying that identification with terms like “Jamesonian” or “post” was shameful if not verboten. It’s only in recent years that attention among radical intellectuals has swung back toward a meaningful interest in Marxism as Marxism, offering us in many cases a thorough reevaluation of this philosophical system as a whole rather than plucking bits of carrion from a living corpse. This return to Marx arrived most sharply with the onset of economic crisis, and, for my own part, it arrived as an astounding relief. I mean, finally, we were able to talk about the economic again. Finally we could talk about class again without coming off as vulgar, unsophisticated, intellectually ham-fisted knuckleheads incapable of grasping the full complexity of the cultural, the philosophical, the psychological, etc. At the same time, this sweeping desire, particularly in the U.S., to attend to the economic and to material conditions beyond the cultural seems to have asserted itself so forcefully that we now stand in danger of completely misreading or even recklessly undoing, if only for ourselves, the more productive work of the cultural turn. This is an important point, and I believe it brings us back round, however obliquely, to the question you first raised: What do we lose when we surrender poetry as a vital resource?

BN: You bring up more than I can hope to address, Rich. But let me admit my own slight embarrassment: I had originally written “magnify” in the first draft I sent only to realize I meant something closer to “amplify.” So yeah, the least I can do is to bring into focus another blurry phrase of my own above: “poets and communists” (or, if one prefers, socialists or anarcho-communists—the conversation, as you note, is probably beyond our scope here, for better or worse). It is unclear what this signifies. Is there such a thing as “poet” that can be added to “communist” or vice versa? I think one way to express what I meant is to acknowledge that Badiou has a point when he says that the artistic and the political are overlapping but distinct procedures. That is one way to put it. Another way is the “vital contradiction” you rightfully point to above, which on one hand acknowledges that poets that matter are only rarely militants that matter, but on the other hand recognizes that poets that matter still often matter for communists, even if in unexpected ways (let us think, as acidic analogy, of the bourgeois critic’s favorite bedtime story of Marx’s recommending to Engels that he read Balzac).

Yet I’m also groping toward something else. Perhaps I can get closer by inverting the question you end with: What do we gain when we surrender poetry as a vital resource? That question might begin to clarify what is at stake because poetry, unlike reverse mortgages or self-help manuals, locates neither its origin in capitalism nor its foreseeable end in the destruction of wage labor and private property. And, unless we are talking about something like Plato’s exclusion of poets from the republic, which is a more ancient and complicated problematic, the question to

me borders on nonsense. I have a hard time seeing how we would begin to read the communist history of critique and all it has engendered without poetry. By that I do not mean something precious. I mean poetry just is intrinsic to that history. And, anyway, philosophy's interest in ontology in the twentieth century has turned to poetry in order to think what the nineteenth century scarcely conceived. Poetry is sometimes blamed for its complicity in the linguistic turn, or for the cottage industry on Dasein that you mention, or whatever. But for me poetry is remarkable in its capacity to think the gap at the end of thought, the contingent and the time that never coincides with its time. Bruno Bosteels's comments on Neruda are one example of this, as are yours that language is a site of struggle. And although the end of capital is certainly on its way, and soon, either because capital has put an end to human history or because collective revolution has put an end to exploitation, I think it is only fantasy to think that poets, or any intellectuals for that matter, will lead that revolution. One thing that poetry might allow us instead is a temporality that is not derived from the dominant order. Communism will be impossible until it is not. Poetry sometimes allows us to think and feel what this means.

There are enormously damaging effects of the Kulturindustrie that can't just be brushed aside by recent discursive shifts, and they are clear in the ways you mention. Poetry is not immune, obviously, as so much of what is published today testifies. The university industry and big pharma cash have in recent decades changed what it means to be a poet in the U.S. Poetry has largely internalized in order to become an alibi for the structural changes in the academy that have created graduates for contingent labor pools and over a trillion dollars of student debt. The irony of course is that even as this has happened poets have been placed in an increasingly politicized location that is the site of crisis in the reproduction of capital. The system has no future. In Boston, which really has a concentration of universities like nowhere else in the U.S., this is becoming increasingly apparent. In that sense, our having leaped off from Neruda has been instructive. It is instructive not only because of the fact that the Left of Latin America has been more active than the United States but also because it lets us discuss what you called adversarial violence.

You are exactly right to put weight on the conventional English translation: "militant tenderness, / of wheat, hide and burning animal." As you point out, "militant" doesn't adequately express what "combatida" is doing in that line, and I think your suggestion that conflict and struggle and in turn a violently amplified, hardened tenderness are implied is more than correct. I would add only that "combatido" is often used to indicate not only external struggle, equivalent perhaps to the English "embattled," but also internal division, strife, or contradiction itself. Here it gives rise to a passion that reaches an absolute pitch amplified by "ardiendo." The translation of "ardiendo" solely as an adjective, "burning animal," isn't right. It is not merely a burning animal, in other words. It is the "combatida ternura" *burning*; indeed, its burning is upheld ("sí...") against the fascist hierarchy implied by "diadema." The verbal indicates not only what is happening, say, just to the animal (that it is being burned), but also indicates *the antagonism burning as such* ("sí...*combatida ternura* de trigo, cuero y animal *ardiendo*"). Aren't these lines, then, also a sort of indictment of one of the contemporary pleasures of the U.S. Left, that is, its glorying in failure only in order to offer another analysis of how we ended up this way?

RO: This question of failure is an important one. I almost always find myself mildly disgusted when poets and critics deploy the language of failure. On a certain level this disgust may be

reducible to nothing more than a self-indulgent cynicism, but my resistance to lending failure the nobility of success feels much more complex than any imagining of a sneering forget-me-not cynicism might suggest. Failing better only flies when it doesn't mean Auschwitz, Abu Ghraib or foreclosure. Put differently, if failure is to remain failure it must always register as failure. It must not be rewarded, apologized for or glamorized. When it is then it becomes something other than failure, something wholly apart from failure. Thinking specifically about poetry, Pound opened the floodgates, imbuing failure with the irresistible force of classical nobility precisely at the moment his cantos shatter into a chaotic array of disarticulated bits—that closing cascade of disparate fragments which, acknowledging the poem's inability to sensibly coalesce around the divine force of a stable center, dissipate into a contradictory complex of bitter apologies, despair, weeping indignation and self-righteous defiance. But it is precisely this recognition of failure toward the end of *The Cantos* which transforms the poem, effectively recovering and completing the poem by integrating into it the lapsarian instant classical epic necessarily presupposes. We see this same movement in Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat*, where the figuration of struggle and the figuration of failure can scarcely be disentangled from one another, where the broken back of revolution exalts itself on an altar built in honor of the coming terror. Here failure is offered as a noble presupposition. But this is not failure, not at all, not as such. Failure, if it is to remain itself, must at all times vigilantly maintain the horrific force of its own possibility. But I also believe a language exists beyond the entrepreneurial Janus-faced logic of failure and success—a language and ethos of total and actual cooperation.

This brings us back around, if only by the most indirect route, to this question of terms and I completely agree with your understanding of the frustrating narrowness of available terms for describing political affinities. Communist. Socialist. Anarcho-Communist. Marxist. Against the seemingly indomitable force of market logics, all of these seem agreeable to me. What worries me is how the selection of any one of these terms, often to the rigid exclusion of others, functions to signal a clear and alienating distinction between a hard and a soft politics. The U.S. has no clear socialist base to speak of, at least not one that's broadly organized or at all influential in any conventionally apparent way, and this has been the case for well more than half a century, despite the widespread interest in cultural Marxism among poets and artists from the 1970s forward. Bruce Andrews—who I find myself deeply admiring these days, against earlier and still irreconcilable reservations regarding his work—best exemplifies the lamentable inadequacy of a cultural Marxism, at least as it was adapted by American intellectuals, when he writes in 1983, “Politics = Language (so you economic determinists can just go to hell).” This is a mind boggling assertion to make following, as it does, a decade-long series of dire economic crises, the oil crisis, the acceleration of deindustrialization, the outcome of the 1981 PATCO strike and so on. In a way it's almost as if the work of Raymond Williams, Hobsbawm, Thompson, Hoggart and other early cultural studies critics who struggled very carefully, if at times awkwardly, to think the ineradicable articulation of the cultural and the economic didn't exist at all for American poets and writers working through the seventies and eighties. The preference was for structuralist theory, post-structuralism, Russian Formalism, for a Marxism or cultural politics perfectly cleansed of any need to responsibly grapple with the economic implications of capital. Of course the stunning compatibility of this kind of thinking—of a cultural politics completely liberated from the burdensome chains of an actual class politics—with the aims and movement of the university industry, especially in recent years, is obvious.

Somewhat oddly, on a more parenthetical note, I recently found myself shocked to see the same distaste for the economic we find in Andrews echoed by Franco Berardi in his 2012 book *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* when he claims right at the gate, in the opening paragraph of the introduction: “Economic dogma has taken hold of the public discourse for three decades, and has destroyed the critical power of political reason.” Obviously Berardi’s alluding to the enduring legacy of neoliberalism, the Reagan-Thatcher hegemony, the Washington Consensus and so forth in this passage, but there’s also a clear trace here of the residual logics that enabled the generation of 1968 to turn so belligerently away from an attention to the economic, precisely by way of their close attention to the commodity form, and toward analyses of the spectacle to the near total exclusion of the economic.

In any case, to come back to this question of terms—of terming a politics—I agree that the 4 December 2011 lecture Bosteels delivered in Dewey Square offers a lot, particularly when he shares his longing for “the possibility of a new collective ‘we’ that no longer needs to be criminalized.” If I understand him correctly, he speaks in terms of emergence, framing this emergence as a sort of fleeting social or intellectual energy that might arise under specific conditions during a moment of upheaval and confusion, a brief moment of nascent consciousness retroactively foreclosed on or irrevocably transformed through the act of its naming. Once such a moment is named, its coordinates neatly laid out, the moment itself is somehow compromised, and so the desire seems to be to sustain, expand or suspend such moments of emergence. Prior to its having been named, the ‘we’ that emerges in such an instance is neither prescriptive nor yet bound in any clear way to fields of representation. We can take this in any number of directions, and that is in a sense the whole point, the seeming limitlessness of possibilities such a phenomenon offers. If we extend this kind of thinking to the terms we align ourselves with—communist, socialist, etc.—then the limits we place on ourselves and the extent to which we narrow the range of possibilities becomes, I believe, stunningly apparent. But this positions us at an impasse, a juncture at which we have no choice but to explore and absolutely believe in the possibility of developing a language adequate to the task of naming this moment. Suddenly all the old questions come rushing back: questions concerning the party form, vanguardism, volunteerism, universality and so on. This then would be, if only in part, the task of a poetics. And all of this is to mention nothing yet of concerns surrounding race, gender—concerns which are at all times in jeopardy of being as easily elided as the economic.

BN: I’m glad you brought up Pound and failure, the recognition of failure at the end of *The Cantos*. It resembles an almost Christian process, as though Pound were arriving at a certain ascension or salvation after his having failed, like the ascension of Jesus. Perhaps the Christian element as such is truly more interesting. After all, the mission of Jesus had indeed apparently failed before his ascension into heaven. That the crucifixion could become a sign not of the end of Jesus’ work but rather of divine sacrifice surely indicates the innovative genius of Christianity. Of course, this is one thing in a religious context, quite another in a context of social relations. The compensatory pleasure the Left takes in failure and its analysis may betray a vestigial desire to establish intellectuals—writers, academics, whatever—as a vanguard. It certainly betrays the limits of our contemporary pleasures.

I feel myself wanting to pause over a lot of what you say above, struggling over my response, writing one thing and then abandoning it. Perhaps I’m just obtuse, but my struggle is also

symptomatic of how difficult it is to talk about these issues without falling into a distinction, as you put it, of hard and soft politics. And this matters in a period in which the Left has nothing like, say, the Party to appeal to, or even an immediate social movement. This is a problem that has become increasingly thematized since at least the eighteenth century, e.g. Babeuf, etc., but it has religious analogues that stretch back to far earlier periods. Badiou as we know wants to look to the example of Saint Paul to find a source of militant universalism. I have a certain amount of sympathy with this, but regardless of whether one finds the concept persuasive, it is hard not to appreciate its absence as political phenomenon in contemporary America. We could surely name reasons why, but the point is that—outside the question of a hard or soft politics—we are facing a lack. Like you, I'm amazed that Bruce Andrews could write what he did in 1983, but I also fear that that amazement (mine, not yours) can slip into terrain where it appears the veil has finally been lifted. The distinction between hard and soft politics is often deployed in the U.S. not in, say, a Maoist sense where one divides into two but its reverse: it is deployed to foreclose tentative collective formations like the kinds you describe. Not least, it tends to promulgate idealism. You see this with questions of gender and race. Weirdly (or perhaps unsurprisingly) there has been a sort of reaction in some circles against these questions because they are, so the argument goes, the means by which the economic has been recently elided. At its best this reaction strives to be a critique of ideology and as such has a legitimate (if limited) value, but at its worst it is a reaction that precisely is reactionary and as such needs to be actively combated.

I admit feeling a certain frustration with the way the very large questions you name, party form, vanguardism and so forth, have discursively played out recently. A limited advance has been made. But there has been a real risk of mistaking the surge of rhetorical energy for political energy. What matters to me is that the sites of overlap between poetry and communist politics are identified, examined, and emphasized. This is a practical as much as a theoretical question, because it makes a difference whether you believe (as I do not) communists should preserve the category of avant-garde.

The sites of overlap are pivotal, but even poetry that thinks the political is not identical with politics. Zurita mentions there is a superficial reading of *Canto general* that tries to specify its allegiance to certain historical acts, and to confirm by that a certain kind of communism, and so on. Perhaps another kind of superficiality emerges when poets try to understand historical acts as only another form of poetry. Your map of our current location is, I think, precise: “a juncture at which we have no choice but to explore and absolutely believe in the possibility of developing a language adequate to the task of naming this moment.” I'm not sure I absolutely do believe in that possibility. But, as poets, we may have no choice but to believe in it. Poems circumvent or at least operate according to constraints different from the stupidity of lived consciousness, which is only rarely worth our sustained concentration.

RO: Solidarity is a built thing. Politically and at present I feel—as always and as I suspect many others might—completely adrift, completely unanchored. Occasionally, however, I think the active pressure we exert against our drifting enables rare and unanticipated instances of actual solidarity—blinking instances when a richly differentiated complex of otherwise disparate historical forces conspires to enable the emergence of a common bond built on the back of shared desires, dissatisfaction and outright suffering—moments of mutual affection and concern that somehow diminish the anguish of total alienation by rendering that alienation legible. In

such instances, at such junctures, the possible splays itself open and lays itself bare, summoning us to pursue, against capital, imaginings of agreement, cooperation and provisional universality that resist ironing out difference or indicting dissensus. And so for me, the task of a poetry capable of complementing and amplifying these rare conjunctures of force is not to offer heart-rending testimony or indulge in a meth-charged fit of manifesto making. Nor is it to take on the weight of a labor better left to philosophical inquiry. The primary task of such a poetry is to body forth, labor through and rigorously maintain a space for the overdetermined diathesis of internal tensions and active contradictions, the explosively unstable pressures, that dissensus, within and beyond the self as a shattered but shatteringly well-ordered object among objects, already presupposes. And when I invoke dissensus here this is no appeal to Ranciere's delineation of the concept; I mean dissensus in its simplest formulation, as the opposite of consensus, as internal disagreement within a single body. This is where I find the work of the woefully under-read Czech philosopher Jan Patočka useful, his rigid insistence on the ineradicable reliance of *polis* on *polemos*, city on strife, community on conflict.

This is the long way around to saying, yes, your sense that poems get things right even as, or precisely because, their creators get them wrong sounds right. And perhaps this is the "principle of autonomy" Prynne refers to when, in the closing pages of his 2011 commentary on George Herbert, he claims: "Poetic form as developed in a specific mode of practice contains somewhere within its specification a certain motive and principle of autonomy, in resistance to instrumentalism; not incompatible with other commitments intrinsic and extrinsic, but if the presiding motive of a poem is to culminate in fully becoming its poetic self, to fulfill the nature proper to its kind, it may become cramped or damaged by shortfall or invasion from alien preoccupations, alien because originating from loyalties not so easily reconciled with the objectives of poetic form." I find myself a little uncomfortable with Prynne's usage of autonomy in this passage, am perhaps unable to grasp his precise meaning, but his view of poetic form—as a particular species of poetic form—as something other than a blunt instrument to be recklessly swung like a bat or thrown like a brick in the service of an insurrectionary impulse feels spot on. As a poet with an enduring and fully committed affinity for Marxism, I believe Prynne offers a refreshingly affirmative corrective to activist poets whose abysmally uninspired imaginings of poetry compel them only to paradoxically instrumentalize *and* deride the productive capacity of poetry, thereby diminishing the affective and intellectual energies latent within the poetic. In any case and at the very least, the desire for revolution—for something other than capitalism—should never be an excuse for bad writing or lazy thinking. Yet whenever the tired question of poetry's relation to the political emerges the results are too often the same. The poet-qua-activist turns against himself, herself, against poetry, for shame of a grotesquely powerless intellectual privilege which, in the final if not every instance, shamelessly yields to the call of capital in order to preserve itself while at the same time preserving the indispensable illusion of its political integrity through a banal cacophony of impotent protestations predictably slathered in all the prescriptive force and masculinist ferocity of a Calvinist sermon. Is it wrong to expect more—demand more—want more—from ourselves and our comrades alike?