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Paul Magee

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## Poetry as a physics of power

### **Abstract**

1. Power Marx's Theses on Feuerbach were written in Brussels in 1845. They occupy just three pages of the fifty volume Collected Works, and comprise Marx's call for an exit from philosophy and an embrace of revolutionary agitation. A series of terse formulations, the Theses begin in the highly abstracted language of idealist philosophy, and become increasingly shorter, and closer to the directness of political rhetoric. Thesis XI, the final and most famous, states:

PAUL MAGEE

## Poetry as a Physics of Power

### 1. POWER

Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* were written in Brussels in 1845. They occupy just three pages of the fifty volume *Collected Works*, and comprise Marx's call for an exit from philosophy and an embrace of revolutionary agitation. A series of terse formulations, the *Theses* begin in the highly abstracted language of idealist philosophy, and become increasingly shorter, and closer to the directness of political rhetoric. Thesis XI, the final and most famous, states:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it. (1976 8)<sup>1</sup>

In what follows I am going to argue that the comparatively uncelebrated second thesis on Feuerbach, can be read as a cogent theory of poetry. I also aim to show that the theory of Thesis II resonates with the practice of Robert Hass — one of the most celebrated contemporary English-language poetry critics. In addition, I will try to extend the range of Thesis II through some critical work of my own. Throughout I will be seeking to raise the possibility that power, far from necessarily inimical, or even just supererogatory, to poetic practice, might be one of the key things that make poetry poetic.

But before I can make that argument, I need to clarify the relationship between Thesis II and XI. Marx did not publish the *Theses on Feuerbach*. They remained unpublished until 1888, when Engels, five years after Marx's death, made them an appendix to his *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. I suggest that Marx did not publish Thesis XI in particular because the only authentic way to hold this thesis — 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it' — is *not* to publish it. To publish it is immediately to render the statement hypocritical. For what are you doing thereby if not philosophising, in spite of your urging to the contrary?

There is little, as Etienne Balibar has recently argued, to distinguish Thesis XI from the concerns of traditional philosophy 'at the heart of its most speculative turn' (19).<sup>2</sup> It is the strict division the thesis imposes between interpretation, on the one hand, and change — that realm of revolutionary action, somewhere out there, beyond the articulation of theses like this one — on the other, that makes it susceptible to such a fate. It does not perform its own truth. Hegel's attack on philosophical stances that trumpet what 'must be'<sup>3</sup> without simultaneously showing how that obligatory reality already has 'being' right here right now on the page, takes us immediately closer to the practice and criticism of poetry.

Let us look now at Thesis II:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. (1976 6)

A statement needs to prove its own truth. Thesis XI only makes sense when read in the light of Thesis II, which has the additional advantage of explaining what Marx in fact went on to do. He did not abandon thinking so as to militate exclusively for change. Rather, he put his thinking — for we are really talking about science here as much as art or politics — to the test. That involved asking the world a question: do these ideas have power? Or rather, which is the same thing, are they real?

Not only did Marx not publish the *Theses*, soon after writing them he stopped writing philosophy altogether. As Louis Althusser remarked, a set of theses which seemed ‘to announce a revolution in philosophy’ was in fact followed by ‘a thirty year-long philosophical silence’ (178). But this picture of Marx’s philosophical silence is not entirely true. Althusser paraphrases a comment of Lenin’s, to the effect that ‘one should look in Marx’s *Capital* for his dialectic — by which he [Lenin] meant Marxist philosophy itself’ (1990 183). The fact is that Marx did not stop writing philosophy at all. *Capital*, published some twenty years after the *Theses*, in 1867, contains Marx’s response to Hegel’s universalism. That critique takes the form of a demonstration that Hegel’s ‘absolute knowledge’ is pre-empted in the very being of the capitalist commodity, which is itself a sort of universalising philosopher (it ‘thinks’ everything in its path in terms of — the only thing it can see — so many quantifiable and precisely exchangeable units of universal human labour), and brings forth societies that conceive the world in similarly abstract and universalising forms, up to and including Hegelian philosophy itself (see further Postone). Yet that critique comes by way of a this-worldly discussion of political economy. Hegel’s crowning idea is thus revealed as a fantasy masking a contingent social form, a social form which itself serves to mask the most powerful of the modern forms of slavery. In sum, Marx demonstrated that his philosophy was more cogent than Hegel’s by setting up a verbal experiment (that is, *Capital*, the book itself, including the economic data it amasses and analyses) that would show the ‘reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking’ (1976 6).

There is however no need to restrict the explanatory power of Thesis II to the ‘thought-experiments’ of book-based theory. To the contrary, the thesis inspires us to realise that the ‘reality and power’ of Marx’s demonstration could just as well be the revolutions and governments his theoretical work lead to. In this light, one might want to claim that the history of the twentieth century has conclusively disproved Marx’s philosophical work.<sup>4</sup> Thinkers like Meghnad Desai, André Gorz, David Harvey and Moishe Postone, on the other hand, suggest — at the very least — that the question is still in the balance. According to those authors, Marx’s statement is still being made.

That is why I like Thesis II so much more than Thesis XI. Instead of gesturing to a world that is purportedly better than that in which its speaker finds him or herself, Thesis II offers a mode of speech whose measure is its repercussions upon the very place we inhabit. Less dismissive of philosophy than Thesis XI, it is, by the same token, so much more in this world. It leaves open the possibility that our language itself might be the spark to fire change. But that is already putting it too teleologically. For Thesis II — and again, this marks a point of contrast with Thesis XI — cannot be read as supplying blind support for change. It is much more like a focussing device, to help us isolate the moment of power.

## 2. CRITICISM WITH POWER

I have just outlined a critique of one of Marx's theses, and expressed the superiority of a different one. I have done so by relying on the theoretical statements of thinkers who themselves identify as Marxists, plus Hegel, who in many ways speaks through them; and of course I have relied on the critical power of Thesis II itself.

The curious thing is that I could have arrived at the same result by way of poetry criticism. I will sketch how this is so by analysing an essay by celebrated American critic Robert Hass. The essay is entitled 'James Wright' and concerns the American poet of that name, (1927–1980), who is perhaps best known for his poem 'Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio' and, more generally, for introducing a vivid, imagistic sensuality into North American verse. Hass (1941–), on the other hand, is based in California, taught at UCLA with Czesław Miłosz, won the U.S.A.'s National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism in 1984 for *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Prose on Poetry*, and is also a poet in his own right. 'I want,' Hass offers, 'to say some things against James Wright's poems, which I love' (28). As we will see in analysing the nature of those complaints, poetry for Hass, far from being 'fantastic', is itself a form of 'reality and power' (Marx 1976 6); it proves its own truth, in its own words, at every step.

A parallel between Karl Marx and a contemporary critic of poetry might appear to be a counter-intuitive project. Who in the philosophical canon would support such a blatant equation of poetry and power? Did not Spinoza, that astute observer of language and habit — 'Marx without a beard', as Georgi Plekhanov once called him (Anderson 64) — oppose power to poetry in the *Tractatus Politicus*? There Spinoza attacks philosophers who refuse to think through realpolitik, on the grounds that such thinkers have merely 'produced fantasies, ideas that could only be realised in Utopia, or the Golden Age of the poets, when of course they were least required' (n.p. [my translation]). Poetry, for Spinoza, is a place of fantasy and weak philosophy, the very opposite of practical thought. The parallel I am drawing is, indeed, a counter-intuitive one, though I hasten to add from the outset that Hass is not the only critic I might have drawn on to make it: Ted Hughes comes to mind (19; 43), also Robert Pinsky (6–9), Randall Jarrell (230), Stephen Spender (161) and contemporary Australian critic Elizabeth Campbell (46–55).

All have held positions on poetic value similar to Hass's, which is to say, positions redolent of Marx's second thesis as to how thinking needs to evidence its own 'reality and power'; and this is the case even when — or rather most particularly when — such poetry posits Utopia, or any other such 'Golden Age'. But my point here is not to cover the field and it is certainly not to claim that all criticism works in this fashion. Rather it is to demonstrate, through one particular case, that Marx's thesis on how to evaluate revolutionary thinking can be just as cogently applied to poetry. Indeed, such a demonstration might get us closer to the core of what poetry (or at least a certain celebrated practice of it — I will cite Emily Dickinson later) in fact is.

It is the gestural nature of aspects of Wright's work that Hass complains of: the fact that the poet repeatedly points to those better places, beyond the degraded Puritan world of 1950s and '60s North America, without ever actually demonstrating their existence. So Hass criticises Wright's over-reliance on 'plain words from romantic poetry, *lovely, beautiful, terrible*, that do not describe anything but tell you that someone is feeling something' (36). Such words are doubtless easy targets. But the criticism effects Wright's more elaborated phrasings as well. Hass cites the following lines, from Wright's famous 1963 volume *The Branch will not Break*:

... Only two boys  
 Trailed by the shadow of the rooted police,  
 Turn aimlessly in the lashing elderberries.  
 One cries for his father's death,  
 And the other, the silent one,  
 Listens into the hallway  
 Of a dark leaf (qtd in Hass 36)

'There is no ground in these lines,' Hass comments critically, 'between the violent outer world and the kid listening poetically down the hallway of a dark leaf' (36). Though the phrasing is much more complex and indeed sensual than in the case of the poet using a simple word like 'lovely', the problem for Hass is the same: the world which that silent boy apparently accesses is not actually described as any plausible sort of place. I mean, that it is not even metaphorically plausible. Compare, given we are on the theme of plants, Auden's 'The crowds upon the pavement / Were fields of harvest wheat' which captures a sense of crowding, anonymity and perhaps even comfort common to the experience of either phenomenon (129). What distinguishes Wright's lines from these is the fundamentally random nature of the association he offers us, that between a 'hallway' and a 'dark leaf', neither of which can really be said to say anything about the other. What we actually have here is not a description of anything, so much as a sign for all that is inaccessible. The case of the philosopher calling, in a philosophical text, for an end to all that is philosophical is not dissimilar. What Hass rejects is Wright's repudiation of language.

Elsewhere in *Twentieth Century Pleasures*, Hass praises a poem, ‘Baltics’, by the Swede, Tomas Tranströmer (1931–), for the lines:

I stand with my hand on the door handle, take the pulse  
 of the house  
 The walls so full of life  
 (the children won’t dare sleep alone up in the attic — what  
 makes me feel safe makes them uneasy) (88)

Hass imputes to these lines ‘an awakening which has no form but itself; it is not the fantasy of a paradisaic form that exists elsewhere’ (76); whereas he criticises lines from Wright’s ‘The Branch will not Break’ like

The secret shelters of sparrow feathers fallen into the snow (37)  
 and

...if I stepped out of my body I would break  
 Into blossom (37)

as exemplars of Wright’s penchant for ‘repeating his talismanic nouns and adjectives of the discovery of the inner world’ (36). Words like ‘secret’ are ‘talismanic’ for Hass because they symbolise a magic that is not forthcoming. The reader is given no hint as to what would make sparrow feathers on the snow function counter-intuitively as ‘shelters’; the adjective ‘secret’ may be intended to qualify the nature of those shelters, but it could just as easily be read as the poet’s admission that he is not letting the reader in on the reality he is describing, perhaps because it is not one. The second quotation, on the other hand, does go some way toward performing its subject matter and so putting the ‘reality and power, that is, the this-worldliness’ (Marx 1976 6), of the concepts to the test. It is the enjambment on ‘break’ which causes a little jump as the reader flicks back to the left-hand margin, and suddenly ‘Into blossom’. It is still a weak step, I would suggest, mainly because the association of flower and transformed self is, again, so ultimately unrelated to any actual transformative phenomenon. What we have rather is an instantly recognisable symbol: flower-life stands for ‘that which is beyond us’, and calls out our yearning. I’m reminded of the ‘angels’ contemporary Australian poets so often (and unfortunately) often invoke, to similarly mawkish effect.

I suspect Hass would find Spinoza’s reference to ‘fantasies, ideas that could only be realised in Utopia, or the Golden Age of the poets, when of course they were least required’ pertinent, were it applied to Wright’s lines above. The distinction with Spinoza’s picture (other than the fact that Spinoza is attacking weak philosophy first and foremost and just sideswiping poetry in the process) is that when Hass makes comments of a similar order it is not to disparage poetry in general, but rather to critique those poems, or lines, that fall short of *actually amounting to poetry*.

Hass puts the matter in Nietzschean terms: ‘Aestheticism, is what I am talking about, decadence’ (Hass 40). Hass’s subsequent gloss only underlines the

association he makes between poetry and the expression of power: aestheticism is, he adds,

a cultural disease and it flourishes when the life of the spirit, especially the clear power of the imagination and intelligence, retreats or is driven from public life, where it ought, naturally, to manifest itself. The artists of decadence turn away from a degraded social world and what they cling to, in their privacy, is beauty or pleasure. (40)

This is a version of Nietzsche but it could also be Marx — ‘Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice’ — not to mention Spinoza himself, the Spinoza of that same, ferocious *Tractatus Politicus*, which repudiates all notion of abstract human rights, to insist that the only rights are those which are actual (14–18).

Yet this is not to suggest that the ‘inner world’ is excluded from the ambit of critics who hold positions like Hass’s. Hass’s critique of Wright’s tendency — amid some otherwise gripping and at times even devastating poetry — to fall to gesture is certainly not a rejection of introspection. The point is rather that the emotional and intellectual dimensions of that introspection have to be enacted, to the point that they impress their actuality upon us. Far from a rejection of the ‘inner world’, Hass’s criticism takes the form of an insistence that Wright be less reticent about it, for he should be bringing it to the fore, allowing it to overwhelm.

We can see something like this principle at work in Emily Dickinson’s poem, ‘26’, which I bring to the table to exemplify the sort of thing I think Hass is implicitly valorising through these critiques:

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The Brain, within its Groove  
 Runs evenly — and true —  
 But let a Splinter swerve —  
 ‘Twere easier for You —  
 To put a Current back —  
 When Floods have slit the Hills —  
 And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves —  
 And trodden out the mills — (online)

Dickinson’s poem plants a splinter in the reader’s mind and then submits it to a flood of imagery, which gathers in rhythmic pace as it goes from the finicky syllables, each demanding precise articulation, of ‘easier’, to the quickening pace of the following two lines, the sudden sense of expansion in ‘And scooped a turnpike for themselves’ which adds another beat to the trimeter timing of what has preceded it, and so a fitful rush into the final line, only to conclude on the liquid consonants of ‘mills’. After the rushed first reading — for that is what the prosody compels you to do, to rush — the reader has now to displace all that flooding imagery, like so many rivers in the mind, to draw them back and find some sort of contemplative space in this midst, in which the beguiling, and perhaps even

anxious question might play out its inner tensions: how can a splinter swerve? Is the mind reading this poem just such a splinter? This is Marxian poetry, in the terms of Thesis II. There is not an other-worldly gesture in it, though it is startling and indeed estranging. It proves its reality through its power. In fact, they are the same thing.

The Hassian/Marxian stance insists that a poet of the ‘inner world’ should be bringing it to the fore, persuading readers that there is indeed such a place. That such a stance is equally a critical measure of stagy writing becomes apparent if we train it on ‘The Inversion of Simonides’ Line about the Sun’, a recent poem by Australian poet John Kinsella (1963–). The poem concerns a rural Australian child’s painful experiences when learning to read, and begins:

Head down on the desk,  
 he hides tears that force  
 their way out, warping ink  
 of words he can’t read.  
*Isoglosses*: smudges of dialect,  
 script across areas of page,  
 title deeds to land his grandfather  
 collated: blocks of mallee, (20)

Kinsella does not actually give us the line of Simonides that he references in his title, the line which this poem will apparently go on to invert. This might be understood as placing those readers who do not have the Greek Anthology to heart in the position of the illiterate child the poem describes. If so, it seems an easy effect. But it is the enjambment on ‘force’ in the second line, however, that really underscores the weakness of the poem’s rhetoric. The reader who is pausing to reach the start of the new line, is caused to mime the slight pause one experiences as tears well up. Yet this is only the second line — no sense of drama has been built up, other than, perhaps, a sense of exclusion in relation to Simonides — and there is something just a bit too pushy about it. Is the reader really crying over this?

This sense of forcing is compounded as the poem continues through a reverie that opens out from those ‘blocks of mallee’ through an inventory in short, variously enjambed and otherwise tensile phrases, of the property where the child was raised with its ‘vast cleared spaces, / fencelines and patches of scrub,’ and its processes of mapping, ‘paddock-making’ and tending,

each year upturning  
 more relic-like granite,  
 more history. His reality.  
 The teacher approaches  
 and he chokes on his sobbing. (20)

‘His reality.’: I take issue with that emphatically short, verbless, sentence. It is as if the forthrightness of the grammar and the finality of its end-stopped positioning

were, in themselves, enough to persuade the reader that he or she has had the powerful experience of being taken to that place. But were the lines preceding this phrase expressing their own reality and power in the manner Hass requires, we simply would not need to be told: neither that it is his, nor, even more emphatically, that it is real to him. We would already be there.

There is a political aspect to Kinsella's poem as well. 'The family have sent him out', we read towards its end,

... a boarder, home  
 only on holidays, socialising  
 with kids his own age,  
 to confront a language  
 he neither reads nor writes.  
*It's your language, they say ...*  
*it explains who you are,*  
*where you come from.*  
 Why wheat grows  
 in the light of day ... (20)

So Kinsella reworks the tropes of postcolonial theory, to convey the oppressive power of a hegemonic language on the white regional subject, whose reality will not survive the translation. There is protest here, and a lament for things that are local. Hass's criticism of the weak power of James Wright's protests against Puritan civilisation is pertinent here. The weakness in those protests for Hass is that they fail to convey that Puritan strictures are delivered by people too, who also feel and desire, in however deformed a fashion. Yet their world is all abstract and colourless in Wright's hands. Hass proceeds to remind us that, where the initial version of Blake's 'London' ran

I wander'd thro' each dirty street,  
 Down where the dirty Thames does flow, (qtd in Hass 42

the final version became

I wander thro' each charter'd street,  
 Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,

He comments on the improvement:

*Dirty* is a protest; *charter'd* is a seeing: it confronts not squalor but an order that men have made. It meets power with power, the power of poetry to illuminate and clarify, to speak out of its whole being. (42)

What is Hass doing here if not bleeding the whole category of the 'protest' poem out of existence? All that remains is the poem of power. Kinsella's poem is weak on these same grounds.

But let us return to the theme of 'the inner world', and from Kinsella and Blake back to Wright. As I have been arguing, Hass does not reject the right of the 'inner world' to speak. Rather, he attacks those lines of Wright's that serve to obscure the

expressions of its power. It seems to me that what is driving Hass to this attack is something like the following: in obscuring that ‘inner world’, making it occasion for the ‘familiar celebration of whatever is not mind [...] everything unformed, unconscious and suffused therefore with yearning’ (28), Wright hides from us the very thing that is so revolutionary and uncompromising about modern poetry.<sup>5</sup> I indicated above that something strikingly akin to the second thesis on Feuerbach (‘Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice’) can be found on the lips of many a good poetry critic, and I have started to suggest that something like this is driving a poet like Dickinson as well. The fact that Hass will indiscriminately apply this same criterion both to the introspective verse of James Wright and to the much more public verse of William Blake, gets to the heart of the issue. For it points to the radical absence, in modern poetry, of any clear distinction between inner and outer experience.

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Mikhail Bakhtin provides, so as to critique it, one example of such a distinction: that between the person one is in public, with all the complications and evasions which social, and with it linguistic, interaction requires, and the actual individual whose true desires, feelings — bodily experiences even — course beneath such masks. Bakhtin asserts, to the contrary, that ‘experience exists even for the person undergoing it *only in the material of signs*’ (28 [my emphasis]). Signs are by definition social and shared and so, for Bakhtin, is the material of our innermost thoughts and experiences. Now to demand, as Hass does, a poetry that will ‘illuminate and clarify ... speak out of its whole being’ (42), regardless of whether it deals with public or private life, is to demand of poets that they treat that inner life, and all its experiences, in similarly Bakhtinian fashion: as something that takes place and has its reality and power ‘in the material of signs’, which are both public and intimate at the same time. What is more, it is to suggest that William Blake (‘Energy is eternal delight’ (358)) — the inspiration for Hass’s pronouncement — was alive to just this coherence of public and intimate speech, and that so too was Emily Dickinson. Both are ‘this-worldly’ poets to the letter, as is Tomas Tranströmer.

To consider the observation Bakhtin makes a few pages later in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* brings one even closer, I would suggest, to the experience of the sort of poetry we have seen valorised above. Bakhtin proceeds to focus on what happens when one marshals those signs in the form of conscious thought, which he terms ‘inner speech’:

Close analysis would show that the units of which inner speech is constituted are certain *whole entities* somewhat resembling a passage of monologic speech or whole utterances. But most of all, they resemble the alternating lines of a dialogue. (38)

There is no *single person* for Bakhtin, behind any set of thoughts, but rather a cluster of voices within the ‘I’ that variously propose and re-join, and are quite literally in conversation. This is the nature of reflection as understood by Bakhtin. The concept is a striking one, particularly for academics, accustomed as we are, to

founding our identities on the capacity both to posit a proposition and subsequently to defend it — as if we remained the same monologic person in the passage between these two acts (Lacan 62–65). Again, this idea that we think as a multiple personality is Bakhtin’s theoretical position, in illumination of a reality we tend not to interrogate; but is it not also the case that one experiences something like a conscious sense of this subjective splitting into dialogic partners with oneself, when reading, that is, *thinking through*, poems like that by Dickinson above? I will turn to address this sort of subjective splitting in greater detail below. But I will add in passing that none of this is to suggest that we necessarily survive such experiences intact. I am referring, after all, to Marx’s theory of revolution.

### 3. THESIS II (REPRISE)

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. (1976 6)

I have raised the possibility that we contemplate modern poetry, and the allied art of its criticism, as strategies for the expression of power, and I have drawn heavily on Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach to do so. Yet this thesis can be understood in a number of ways: I have just discussed a way which would be something like the self-proving statement, the line that enacts the very thing it describes. Kierkegaard would claim that ‘*veritas index sui*’, *truth provides its own criterion* (73) and this focus on the self-fulfilling nature of truth gives a reasonable insight into Hass’s position. He refers, as we have seen, to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76).

But of course no statement can really be said, strictly speaking, to be self-proving. When we find poems whose signifiers embody for us the ‘reality and power’ of their subject matter, it is clearly just as much because of the way they compel or seduce our imaginations into collaborating on the production of that picture, as for any properties of adequation in the actual text. Even Ted Hughes, whose theories of poetry (as embodied in the much anthologised poem ‘The Thought-Fox’ (2003 51), and in the prose text *Poetry in the Making* — ‘read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a creature’ (19) — which admittedly was written for children) seem most open to the charge of a naïve belief in presence in language, makes it clear that the reality and indeed the power in question is actually an inter-subjective one: ‘the whole art of writing is to make your reader’s imagination go into action’ (43). Insofar as I have a criticism of Hass, it is that when he refers to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76), he is eliding the fact that that awakening takes its form not simply on the page but also in the reader’s imagination, just as it first did in the case of that primary reader who was the poet, him or herself.

Is it not much more pertinently the case that thinking proves its truth ‘i.e. its reality ... and power’ in the inter-subjective space between the text and those others who encounter it, with all the slippage this implies? Which brings forth another, and I would suggest ultimately more apt, way of reading Marx’s second thesis: it is that thinkers need to write or speak in such a way that the world itself will demonstrate the cogency of their words by the way it takes them up. Such an interpretation points to the link between someone reading a given poem and starting to act in a particular way, not to mention between Lenin reading Marx’s *Capital* and the Russian revolution. I am referring to the way a writer’s words act to move bodies, whether the immediate body of the reader, or the bodies that reader will then influence and sway (including his or her own future body), in turn.

I do not think poetry criticism really has a language to deal with the idea that the proof of a statement, or a line of poetry, lies in the reader’s uptake of it. But I have difficulty appraising a poem like ‘Cochlear Implants’, by Australian Jennifer Harrison (1955–), without such a notion. The poem begins:

What will I recognise?  
How will birds present  
their shattered monasteries? (25)

After the first line there is no need for the poet to indicate, in a subsequent gloss in case we missed it, that for one facing the prospect of sudden hearing gain, this is ‘her reality’. The second and third lines are rather more beguiling, and I have to say that in my own case it took many goes before a metaphorical reading dawned on me: any given environment, when shrouded in absolute silence, could take on something of the air of a monastery, and its inhabitants, whatever they might be doing (‘men in mime digging / with their jackhammers at noon’ appear later in the poem), might take on a monkish air of ritual about them as well; it is *this* which the journey to hearing shatters. Such would be one way to make sense, plausibly, of these two lines. But the reader’s effort to arrive at some such reading of them is, I believe, subject to the continual interference of the vivid literal image which they immediately offer: birds flying about a shattered ruin. One wavers between the attempt to treat as metaphor what seems to demand a metaphoric reading, and yet is only on the verge of the comprehensible, and the immediate pull of the scene is engraved in its very signifiers. This might amount to just the sort of struggle to comprehend a world made new that a dawning sensory perception involves. Again, Harrison does not tell us that this is ‘her reality’. But something has been implanted all the same.

What is more, and this is my key point, I do not see how you can appraise these opening three lines without suggesting that they give rise to a similar process of struggling to comprehend in the reader. If it is not these lines which do so, it will be others, for Harrison’s signifiers repeatedly usurp their would-be signifieds in this fashion:

Will I feel intruded upon?  
 Deafened? tell me  
 how do I poach from rubbled sound  
 the language of my hands? (25)

The ‘rubbled sound’ harkens back to those initial ‘shattered monasteries’ but it has something even more of the impossible about it: what can it mean? I found myself having a sudden recollection of something I read about the Kabbalah once, something about the concept of the *Shekinah* — the sudden shattering of a vessel which brings the universe into being (Scholem 65). I cannot say that that association contains the gap I feel when confronted with the idea of a sound ‘rubbled’ by the ruin of silence. The phrasing beguiles, and another voice within me arises, in Bakhtinian fashion, to offer a totally different association, or even a leap to interpretation. Then another. I keep peering at the phrase.

At such times, whether in this instance or over another such run of words, you could say that this poetry does not take us to any reality at all, so much as a gap on the verge of it. But there is a contrast to be made here with those poems critiqued above: Wright’s ‘listens into the hallway / Of a dark leaf’ is not, as Hass points out, on the verge of anything (36), while Kinsella’s Ancient Greek reference to ‘words he can’t read./ *Isoglosses*, smudges of dialect’, bespeaks readerly exclusion but nothing like the minor anxiety and entrancing confusion that gives the reader the sense that there is actually something he or she might learn here, about something that concerns that reader intimately. The ‘reality and power’ of Harrison’s work is, in short, that of a question, which engages the reader because it is drawn his or her world into its query. It is the ‘this-worldliness’ of the gaps she opens up *in her readers* that marks all the difference between such moments in Harrison’s poem and the sorts of aestheticism Hass criticises. That is also, however, why his reference to ‘an awakening which has no form but itself’ (76) will not suffice to explain it: these gaps have their form in the reader.

But the thing that lodges itself most fully in my mind is ‘the bee’. Harrison’s poem concludes:

Before I take the bee inside  
 give me time  
 to memorise the poem I’ve seen:  
 the red hibiscus in bloom  
 my street without shadow —  
 outside the window, men in mime digging  
 with their jackhammers at noon. (25)

The most obvious reading of the first of these lines, at least to me, is the metaphorical one: ‘the bee’ stands for her hearing device. But this interpretation is also faced with a sort of interference, and it has to do with the oddness of that metaphor (bee = cochlear implant), which inclines the reader to think past it, particularly given the vivid, literal meaning that also immediately suggests itself,

once more from the surface of the signifiers themselves: it is the possibility that an actual bee will literally enter her ear. Could that, however, be a description of hearing? Marx has a revealing comment to make in this regard, from chapter one of *Capital*: 'in vision, light actually passes from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. We are dealing with a physical relation between physical actualities'; yet, he continues, in perceiving we ignore this relation of 'subjective stimulation' so as to create the sense that what we perceive is actually 'a concrete object existing outside the eye' (1930 45). The same applies to hearing and sound waves. From this point of view, what I perceive is actually and always right inside me as well as out there in the world. It was just such a reading, via a dim memory of Marx's passage that in due course arose within me while I was brewing over this passage. But if so — to focus just on that one, personal experience of the lines — how strange: that the metaphorical meaning of Harrison's phrase was the immediately obvious one, while the literal meaning was the initially obscure, and then gradually enlightening, one. Then again, Harrison is talking about — and in some wise *proving in her reader* — the experience of gaining an extra sense, which would seem from these lines to involve just such a dawning sense of how all these new properties can speak through the very surfaces of things.

But that is not all that is implanted, at least in my case. Whenever I read 'Cochlear Implants' as a whole, sounding it out in my head, dwelling within the spaces I find there, it is like I myself 'take the bee inside', and this time once more as a metaphor. What I mean by this is that I feel some strange awakening that lasts for at least the rest of the day, as if the instruction to hear and also not to hear my environment has been at once sealed and activated within me. I keep recalling that instruction, like a whispered suggestion, at odd moments of the day, such as during meetings, or in the middle of intimate conversations. And I think through it. In fact, this is how I experience Harrison's poetry more generally. Her poems turn me into their agent — and their scientist.

I have said that I do not think criticism has a language with which to evaluate poetry in terms of such impacts, which are at once pragmatic, based on the public medium of language, and yet starkly personal to each interpreter. How, indeed, can one present the documentation of such a reading (that is, of one's lived embodiment of the gaps in the poems), and yet still maintain the illusion of that 'concrete object existing outside the eye' (Marx 1930 45), which others can be shown and persuaded to value accordingly, and objectively? Do you simply not talk about such reading experiences, even though the fact of their traction is — the logic of my argument would lead me to assert — the key proof of the power, and with it, the reality of the poem in question? Is it better simply to pretend none of this took place?

#### 4. THE SCIENCE OF THE FUTURE

Thesis II offers a blunt response: 'The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question' (1976

6). You might say that the lack of such a critical meta-language is no more an issue to the poet than to the revolutionary. Why should they care whether it is possible to objectify the phenomenon of a text's hold on you, or not?

But that is not quite true, in either case. There are a number of twentieth-century texts one could turn to here, from Lenin's *What Is To Be Done* through Che's *Guerilla Warfare* to Subcommandante Marcos' interviews and communiqués. As with the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the focus of such writing is the thoroughly poetic topic of how language can be used in such a way that it will move future bodies in time and space, and what such writing assays in various ways is the continual problem of how one can, in any given case, ever know with the necessary degree of objectivity what that uptake will be. It is not a 'purely scholastic question', which is why *What Is To Be Done* hammers it out, again and again. What is more, the critical need to predict, with some degree of objectivity, what language will move others is inherent to poetic practice as well. When I paraphrased Auden some pages above to state that a poem's first reader is the poet him or herself, I also had in mind Auden's corollary: the poet is also the poem's first critic — the one who first thinks the decidedly public question of whether anonymous others will be intimately effected by this particular deployment of signifiers, or not (1975 33). The critic's struggle to assume an objective relation to poetry's power is actually the poet's struggle as well.

The subjectively universalising, critical ideal that anyone who encounters this work will find it similarly compelling must in some wise have accompanied and indeed tormented Marx himself as he laboured on *Capital* in a silence lasting decades, with only glimmers of response towards the end.<sup>6</sup> I have looked at how a Marxian political theory might help us grasp something about certain powerful forms of poetry. Now I want, in conclusion, to suggest that a writing on aesthetics can help make sense of the textual strategy which Marx eventually adopted to ensure that 'the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking', as embodied in *Capital*, would be enacted and ideally proved by others after him, 'in practice'. I intend this concluding analysis to dovetail into my comments on the uptakes, at once performative and epistemological, public and personal, to which Harrison's work gives rise. Ideally, it will move us towards a critical meta-language for talking about them, or rather — and more pertinent to Marx's own position, back there in London in the late 1850s, trying to work out how to write *Capital* — a critical meta-language for engaging in the practical task of assessing the potential powers that an interventionary writing might have upon the future.

Louis Althusser's essay 'The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht, Notes on a Materialist Theatre', one of that philosopher's few writings on aesthetics, is useful here. Just as Lenin is interested in the rhetoric that will bring a critical mass of the populace to action, Althusser is interested in the capacity of art to create subjects who will feel the limits of this bourgeois world of appearances, and so

seek change. This article of Althusser's is the same one that Warren Montag has in recent years tried to revive for literary theory, with the aim of jolting scholars out of commonly held prejudices against the 'scientism' and/or 'structuralism' of Althusser's work. What interests Althusser is the power of particular artworks to foment in subjects a search for their own structures (1979 142).

I will focus on Althusser's comments on Brecht's epic theatre. For Althusser, Brecht's plays are 'marked by an internal dissociation, an unresolved alterity' (1979 37). To understand Althusser's argument it is crucial to realise that this 'unresolved alterity' is not — as the received wisdom on 'the alienation effect' would have it — an alterity between the play and its technically distanced audience. For it is not that Brecht simply pushes us away from the possibility of dramatic illusion and identification, and so forces us to think critically, as if his strategy were to abandon theatre itself, in the belief that *playwrights have only entertained the world in various ways; the point however is to change it*. To the contrary, Brecht's is a much more 'this-worldly' practice. A substantial number of Brecht's characters, including Katrina, the dumb daughter in *Mother Courage*, are calculated to arouse empathy and to retain it through to play's end. One might well say the same of Courage herself. Althusser's point is rather that none of the characters in a Brechtian play, not even *Mother Courage*, are entirely centre stage. That place is taken by what Althusser describes as a 'non-relation'. Now *Mother Courage* is certainly centre stage in her own world, living out the drama of the conflict between maintaining her business and so her family, on the one hand, and risking their death through trading in war, on the other (1979 144). Here, in the play *Mother Courage* sees herself as living through (for 'all the world's a stage'), all of the drama is visible, familiar and thoroughly bourgeois: its denouement concerns the way the decisions she hoped would protect her family lead tragically to its annihilation. One can, and does, readily identify with such a character. Indeed, Brecht might well have left the play at that. But, Althusser insists, there is actually another play being performed on the stage. The play alongside *Mother Courage's* is enacted through placards, historical commentary and song. It concerns the social and economic mechanics of the war being fought all around the family, and this second play makes clear that whatever such a character did, her children would be devoured by the war. This second play places in radical suspension all the drama of the first by rendering its dramatic conflict over profit or protection quite simply meaningless — though that drama nonetheless continues to be felt. The fact that the drama is still felt, for all the equally cogent fact that on another plane it simply does not exist, creates an effect of 'radical alterity'. But it is not an alterity between the stage and its audience, as rather between the stage and itself.

Yet it gnaws at the spectator's mind all the same, and this is for one crucial reason. According to Althusser, these two plays, in all their 'non-relation', have become that spectator's mind:

the play itself is the spectator's consciousness — for the simple reason that the spectator has no other consciousness than the content which unites him to the play in advance, and the development of this content in the play itself. (1979 150–51)

That spectatorial consciousness now finds itself split between two dramas: both make sense in their own worlds, which is to say, again following Althusser, both make sense in this world, yet they fail to cohere, and this amounts to the fact that this world itself fails to cohere. For Althusser such dissonance creates in the spectator a desire to restore the world (which, again, is nothing other than one's own consciousness) to integrity, whether in thought, or deed. The non-relation centre stage, and now internal to the spectator's mind, generates a desire for structure. So Althusser proclaims that Brecht's theatre involves the 'production of a new consciousness — incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompleteness itself' (1979 150). This new consciousness, moved by incompleteness, is as much scientist, the one who will be driven to find out what is so wrong with this world for it to produce such contradictions, as agent, the one who will act to change the mode of production, to make the world whole again. An audience member (a reader, a viewer) thus becomes that 'actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life' (1979 150).

A powerful creative act, understood in these interventionary terms, will be one that can hit upon just the right non-relation — 'take the pulse of the house'; 'But let a splinter swerve'; 'their shattered monasteries' — to wedge its way most deeply into its audience's minds, and thereby their futures. I have very much shifted focus over the last two sections of this essay to concentrate on the power such instances of 'non-relation' can hold, but I hasten to add that such a thing will only have traction if its component parts feel as vividly realised (call them 'illusions of presence' if you like — though I would suggest that usage involves a weak theory of illusion) and this-worldly as a Hass would demand. It has to feel like this really is how a house is felt. This swerve must prove itself in the reader too. What we have here, in sum, and again fully consonant with Thesis II, is a requirement of plausibility — only it is a plausibility that concerns the insistence of an *impossibility*.

As for the plausible impossibility in *Capital*: there are a number of these, all related, but probably the most compelling Marx has implanted there, for our reading at this juncture concerns the paradoxical fact — and again, that it be felt as a fact is essential — that unemployment is actually a problem for capitalist societies. Under what other social formation is the absence of jobs that have to be done a problem? Capitalism is constitutively incapable of enjoying the free time potentiated by the technological advances it is structurally compelled to produce. We actually and increasingly do not need to work (see further Magee; Gorz). We work through blind necessity, and this in spite of the alternate possibilities our

social order ceaselessly brings about. The moment one recognises one's world in that picture of unresolved alterity, Marx's intervention has taken hold.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The whole fifty volumes are gradually being transcribed at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/cw/index.htm> accessed 14/3/09. For the 'Theses on Feuerbach', see <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm> accessed 14/3/09.
- <sup>2</sup> Balibar is referring to those programmatic moments in which philosophy 'strives to *think its own limits*, whether to abolish them or to establish itself on the basis of a recognition of those limits'. He reminds us of a stream of similar such slogans: 'from Parmenides' "Thinking and being are one", to Wittgenstein's "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent", via Spinoza ("God is nature"), Kant ("I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith") and Hegel ("The rational is the real and the real is the rational") (19). Thus what would seem a critique of philosophy becomes little more in practice than a slogan, a weapon in a battle that is all to do with succeeding in philosophy.
- <sup>3</sup> 'What must be is also in fact, and what only must be, without being, has no truth' (qtd in Balibar 23).
- <sup>4</sup> For a summary, but sophisticated, statement of *Capital's* failures to predict the future, see Erik Olin Wright's essay 'Compass Points'.
- <sup>5</sup> To avoid any misunderstanding, it needs to be pointed out that Hass's critique, as précised and explicated in this paragraph, of the 'familiar celebration of whatever is not mind' in Wright's work, cannot be applied to 'The Inversion of Simonides' Line about the Sun'. Indeed, one of the things Kinsella's unfortunate 'His reality' phrase is probably trying to underline is that the child brings his own symbolic language ('blocks of mallee, / caprock, breakaways, / map the farm') to the table, where it is ignored. That poem cannot be criticised for suffusing some fantasy of a pre-semiotic reality with 'yearning'; rather, it suffuses a *prior* semiotic reality with yearning. But the real reason it fails to have the effect I proceed to chart in the paragraphs to follow is not so much its relation to semiosis, as its simple innocuousness.
- <sup>6</sup> Debray comments that the *Manifesto* caused 'hardly a ripple' when first published in German in London, was regarded as 'a bibliographical curiosity' as late as 1871 and only really came to prominence in the mid-1880s; indeed, Marx's obscurity during his life-time — he died in 1883 — was such that '[a]n article on his work in an English journal was still a rare enough event that in the winter of 1881 Marx would show it to his wife on her deathbed' (Debray 21).

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