

On the Poetics of Protest

by Jason Rovito

*Please keep
our streets
clean, over
818 people
have to sleep
on them.*

FRIDAY
MARC
STEVE
ELI WILKE - MARC
MARC
ROBERT
MARC
STEVE

Insofar as the feeling of anxiety is experienced, alone, by the individual, it would seem that the two solitudes experience just that—their solitudes—in radically separate fashions. For in French the event known by Anglophones as a “panic attack,” connoting as it does something of an aggressive, active state (*attacare*: to join battle), is coloured by an altogether foreign sense of passivity: *une crise de panique*. In this instance, as those familiar with this particular experience would admit, the French seem to qualify as the more faithful phenomenologists. Choking on breath, heart racing, the mind speeding past itself: the individual at the height of an anxious spiral falls into a paralysis wholly extraneous to the language of battle. Battle, that is, as an extreme form of dialogue that fails to account for the speechless insularity of the panic-stricken. What’s more, the temporality implied by these two variants is also quite telling. For while an “attack” suggests something ephemeral, something that may cause damage but will most certainly pass, the individual victimized by panic is wholly unable to grasp the reality of either past or future, condemned to experience the present in a feeling of eternal, pressing fullness. In this latter, temporal case, just as with that of the physiological, the symptoms of the event point towards “crisis” as name, and to the mute, overwhelming, intoxicating state occasioned by the dread of its imperative root—*krisis* from the Greek *krinein*: decide.

In something of an interesting twist, however, this linguistic variance appears to muddle when the experience of anxiety shifts from the level of the individual onto that of the collective—that is, when panic is rendered public. For while representatives of both languages often here reach for the classification “crisis,” they do so not in the uncertain manner of one who is faced with a daunting decision, but with the unflinching reflex of an individual under attack. And, to be certain, the “they” to whom we are referring are not the usual suspects of leftist complaint. While in recent years both the American and French governments have responded swiftly, decisively, against perceived crises (i.e. the post 9/11 bombing of Afghanistan, the quelling of the suburban riots in Paris), their supposed critics—the voices of protest—have mobilized their counter-efforts with an identical sense of urgency. However, it is precisely on account of this very bias for immediacy, for action, condemnation—ignoring, as it does, the qualitative integrity of that space-time which separates the moments of crisis and critique—that protest unconsciously betrays itself. In its hurried rush, its quickened pace, protest fails to consider its own mediated nature and, consequently, its own nature as medium.

Which is why it’s more than unfortunate that the insights of poetics—i.e. those derived from formal explorations of *ways of meaning*, as opposed to concern over *what is meant*—are dismissed as frivolous during times of crisis. Tragic even, inasmuch as the discipline of poetics provides an opportunity for that very pause which can usher protest beyond its adolescent stage and towards that surreal pragmatism which attends recognition of the difficulty of its goal: that reality could be otherwise. A goal which, by its collective nature, is itself contingent on an intermediate task—the socialization of the physiological-temporal effects of the imperative tense; the publicization of that uneasy feeling that a decision, *the* decision, can no longer be avoided.

Here, our invocation of “discipline” is far from accidental. For it was precisely while considering the relationship between the anarchistic pleasure of protest and the strict discipline implied by the term revolution¹ that Walter Benjamin, in his essay on Surrealism, introduced his formulation of “poetic politics.” In doing so, he was not unaware of the negative reaction he was sure to elicit—writing of poetry in the Germany of 1929, itself a time of unparalleled crisis. In response, Benjamin made every effort to give voice to his certain challengers, lobbying the rhetorical version of a pre-emptive strike:

“To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution”—in other words, poetic politics. “We’ve tried that beverage before. Anything, rather than that!” Well, it will interest you all the more to see how much an excursion into poetry clarifies things.²

Now, just shy of eighty years later, positioned as we are in another, even more global moment of historical crisis, it would appear as nothing short of folly to repeat Benjamin’s refrain. And so, the contemporary challenges speak first: If we aren’t simply tired of the prescriptive genre in and of itself, wouldn’t yet another “call” for poetic politics fall even more superfluous than Benjamin’s, considering that we find ourselves without the luxury of an aesthetic avant-garde? And, if not superfluous, then at the very least reactionary—given that that the “shock-and-awe” campaign that inaugurated the American invasion of Iraq was both a direct quotation of Surrealist poetics and an unexpected actualization of the ideal Romantic fusion of the aesthetic and the political? In an age of terrorism (both for and against the state), how could we turn, in good conscience, to a movement whose moral abandon flirted with the most random acts of violence?³

And, at any rate, haven't we finally reached that critical stage where meditations on aesthetics simply risk wasting further time? In which something, anything, must be done—*now*?⁴ At this particular moment—as ice caps melt, genocides proliferate, and poverty increases on both relative and absolute levels—to speak about Benjamin, the Surrealists, revolution, poetic politics—one could only do so as ironist or fool. That is, in both cases, as one who is unashamedly late.

And yet, perhaps, the time has come to scrutinize this very category—of *lateness*—as one that has acquired something of an undeserved reputation, vilified by the (often villainous) demands of profitable punctuality. For, once wrenched out of the bias of linear time, that which is late no longer appears evil—nor, what amounts to the same, useless. It is simply, plainly, out-of-time. And truly, has there ever been a better time to be out-of-time than today? When we are inundated by Inconvenient Truths (i.e. the impending, irreversible transformation of the global climate) that, once made public, nonetheless fail to mobilize any form of action other than the replacement of light bulbs?⁵ Where the former habitat of the intellectual (i.e. the university) has mutated into a breeding ground for, at worst, corporate technicians and, at best, conscientious journalists, both of whom subscribe to the very same poetics of Kinko's efficiency? A moment in which political action is stripped so bare of imagination that it limits itself to fashioning placards that read: "End Poverty Now!"—as if traces of black marker on flimsy cardboard, whence accompanied by an exclamation mark, will prove powerful enough to ignite an end to centuries of economic violence? In each of these (undoubtedly well-intentioned) instances we appear to be witness to yet another historical resurgence of idealism, in its proper, philosophical sense. That is, we are confronted by a particular metaphysics of word-magic according to whose logic four-letter words such as "good" and "evil" operate with a mysterious, magnetic force capable of fundamentally reorienting human behaviour. Thus Al Gore and the anti-poverty protestors confidently present their PowerPoint facts, bolstered by their faith in the autonomous, compelling power of words, of the self-evident urgency of that content which is meant.

Faith in the Word—the very motto which, throughout history, has made the idealists and the religious the most compatible of bedfellows. A correspondence that should dampen any shock that protest today, largely without design, draws its source from the moral-religious category of guilt. Thus, the fundamental presupposition: If I am made aware of the absurd relation between poverty and

affluence within my city, or the way in which my unsustainable practices are not only destructive, but actually suicidal-murderous, this obscene knowledge should prove effective enough to compel me to change my behaviour—presumably as consequence of that arresting, queasy sensation which has ever attended that most powerful of three-lettered words: *sin*. And yet, despite the images of Hell or hairy palms—or, with the contemporary iteration, of polar bears drowning—which thus become associatively bound to the targeted act, the behaviour stubbornly continues. So that, in the large majority of cases (and, to be certain, it is with the majority that we are concerned), we can drive to a screening of the latest ecological horror-show, secure from the irruption of an overwhelming sense of contradiction.⁶ "The behaviour continues"—either because the majority of us (smokers, polluters, consumers) are "bad" people (or, what amounts to the same, bourgeois nihilists), or because the obscene and thus intrinsically compelling knowledge which the protestor wishes to communicate has simply not been communicated properly. A letter drafted, yet received.

If we suddenly find ourselves within the domain of morality—so distant, it would seem, from that of poetics—we should check our surprise. For attempts at guiding human behaviour (that is, acts of moral persuasion) are always linguistic in nature. Consider: if someone is sufficiently motivated to convey a moral imperative to others, it is presumably because she has experienced something to such an intense degree that she has deemed it something worthy of communication. In the ultimate case of protest, whether political or mystical, she has experienced that which passes as reality as nothing short of a fundamental lie—an experience so innervating that it makes silence on the matter a virtual impossibility.⁷ And, as the other of silence, it is only through the technology of language that our protestor-moralist can attempt to render this transformative witnessing public. That is, to translate this intoxicating, urgent energy from her memory into a supra-individual, collective form. It is here, at this moment in which the technological dimension of protest comes to the fore, that the link between morality and poetics appears in its most logical light—given that, within the workshop of language, the poet qualifies as the most advanced of engineers.

►► Protest— from *protestari*: to bring forth, to make public, a witnessing of social falsity. ◄◄

Attentive to the manner in which their "magical experiments with words" exceeded the solipsism of mere artistic dabbling, Benjamin positioned the Surrealists as moralists of a materialist stripe. And, in so doing, juxtaposed

their approach to the idealist morality of the “so-called well-meaning left-wing bourgeois intelligentsia,” whose amateur poetics mimicked those of a “bad poem on springtime, filled to bursting with metaphors.” Rather than present “the public with the literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself”—that is, rather than commodify the intoxication that animates moral indignation into words, slogans, and placards—the Surrealists instead sought to communicate, through a series of alchemical experiments, that very dizzying experience of the false which motivated their desire for literary activity in the first place. Thus, using nothing but poetically ordered words, Apollinaire attempted to transcend the moral flatness of print—employing language not to convince his readers to adopt a certain decision (i.e. to move them through the assembly-line itinerary of “introduction-to-conclusion”), but to transport them into that singular state of possibility in which authentic decisiveness can take root. Not a moral argument, but the summoning of a moral perspective:

Open, graves! You, the dead of the picture galleries, corpses behind screens, in palaces, castles, and monasteries! Here stands the fabulous keeper of keys holding a bunch of the keys to all times, who knows where to press the most artful lock and invites you to step into the midst of the world of today, to mingle with the bearer of burdens, the mechanics whom money ennobles, to make yourself at home in their automobiles, which are beautiful as armour from the age of chivalry, to take your places in the international sleeping cars, and to weld yourself to all the people who today are still proud of their privileges.⁸

Or, in other words—there is surely no greater buzz-kill than being subject to a uniform slide show of another’s travel photographs. What demands communication is not necessarily the film of the event (itself only the container), but the otherworldly experience of travel itself.

In the midst of this juxtaposition between materialist and idealist strains of morality, Benjamin asserted his disdain for that political use of metaphor which, through its intentional construction of comparative associations, actually does harm to the very imagination it presumably wishes to ignite. For, when confronted by metaphor—i.e. socialism as “a society in which all act ‘as if they were angels’ and everyone has as much ‘as if he were rich’ and everyone lives ‘as if they were free’”⁹—the individual is reduced to the role of mere spectator-consumer, asked

(imperceptibly) to reconstruct a predigested correspondence. *X is like y*, the Eiffel tower looks like this, poverty looks like that, *imagine if you were there*. In the process of this silent imperative, the relations of production that constitute representational democracy are reproduced to the same degree that the actual space of representation is effaced. Against metaphor, Benjamin advocated the political potential of the image—provided that “image” is considered outside of its commonsensical meaning. By no means an exclusively visual phenomenon, Benjamin’s image is to be distinguished for the way in which it mediates reality. Neither cognitive (since it doesn’t perceive that which is real) nor mnemonic (since it doesn’t recall prior experience), the image relates to reality as an autonomous, parallel force. As the representative of the imagination, the image expands reality, pushes it beyond itself. In short, the image creates. Thus Gaston Bachelard (himself an advocate of the image’s politico-poetic priority over metaphor) favourably cited Proust, given the latter’s suggestion that a particular painting of roses by Elstir succeeded in creating “a new variety with which this painter, like some clever horticulturist, had enriched the Rose family.”¹⁰ In this sense, the image is political to the same degree as it is spatial—that is, insofar as it has pretense to being real. Precisely in its ability to expand-distort reality, in its disruption of the present, the poetic image opens up a reflective space of (and for) experience. To paraphrase Benjamin: It loosens reality like a bad tooth. For isn’t “reality,” as that which is present, always already an image? And, if so, can the mere intellectuality of metaphor prove sufficient to compel someone to imagine, to call forth, another image to take its place? From this perspective, it is perhaps interesting to consider those red plastic Viewfinders which entertained children throughout the 1980s. For their enchanting effect extended not from the photographs that they reproduced, but from the very process of movement between the photographs. From the manner in which one image replaces the other—an almost magical, spine-tingling experience in which a simple thumb-press on a lever transports us into a completely different image-sphere. Perhaps this is what Benjamin was referring to when he enigmatically championed Surrealist poetics for its ability to evoke a “one hundred percent image space.” An image space that, beyond the associative commands of moral metaphor, was simultaneously a total, integral experience: *A body space*. Bodies, of course, as much subject to (and subjects of) morality as “attitudes.”

To clarify, perhaps we can ourselves introduce a juxtaposition: between the poetics of the “End Poverty

Now!” marches and those which informed a recent urban intervention by Toronto artist Mark Daye—itsself something of a protest against “protest” as traditionally conceived. Fashioning street signs that, on their surface, appeared as nothing more than official municipal signage, Daye embedded his protest within the cluttered Toronto streetscape, in the process rendering it largely invisible (i.e. without exclamation marks). And yet, if you happened to recognize one of these signs, their effect was wholly unmistakable: “Please keep our streets clean, over 818 people have to sleep on them,” or “Homeless warming grate. Please keep clear (Oct-May),” or “Homeless sleeping: QUIET.” What dawns significant here, from the perspective of a materialist, bodily morality, is that the poetic construction of these signs—as something of a “magical experiment with words”—often resulted in a physical, visceral reaction upon those passerbys who, confronted by the absurd contradiction between content and form (i.e. “an acknowledgement of poverty by the very apparatus which sustains it?”), *stopped dead in their tracks*—witness to a strange imperative¹¹ which, in testifying against itself, commanded them to enter that decisive space in which it becomes possible to imagine an altogether different social form.

Surely, we dare not suggest that an intervention such as Daye’s is sufficient in and of itself as a substitute for political activity. Nevertheless, its corporeal effect, itself dependent upon the sophistication of Daye’s poetics, strikes us as a necessary precondition for the more traditional political designs of the Make Poverty History! crowds. For these crowds, presently pathetic in numbers, are themselves insufficient to be considered political, and can only grow into that for which they mistake themselves once the passerbys stop passing by. Once they begin to arrive late to that which they themselves mistook as reality. And it is here that lateness reveals itself as an aesthetic, rather than temporal, category. Or, more precisely—that which is late is aesthetic precisely insofar as its unique perspective is positioned outside of the common wisdom of linear time, in which the present is but a waystation towards some future destination (itself modeled on that present’s repetition). In a sense, the present only exists for she who is late as something that is already in the midst of happening. If it is the obscenity of this present, and its projection into the future, which protest wishes to protest against, it must not only advocate a moral pause within others, but—in order to achieve just that—must first engage in something of a poetic pause itself. For it is only by considering its poetic dimension that protest checks its temporal impulse for immediacy.

An immediacy which ironically demands change—*Now!*—at the same rate of exchange as the Boxing Day hordes, and satisfies its desire to the very same degree.

Hence the significance of the subtitle to Benjamin’s Surrealism essay: *The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia*. “Last” not because the Surrealists were then the most recent example of the Enlightenment project, nor the final image of its failure. But “last” because the crisis towards which their poetics responded—that is, the communicative challenge of translating the intoxication of protest into public form—was itself the internal limit of a particular kind of history, itself late in departure:

Nothing, therefore, remains but to direct the gaze, in perpetual expectation of the final onslaught, on nothing except the extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies. But this necessary state of intense and uncomplaining attention could, because we are in mysterious contact with the powers besieging us, really call forth a miracle.¹²

NOTES

1 If we are to admit that our designs here extend no further than the rehabilitation of certain words, the interruption of particular semantic habits, then how can we resist calling attention to that reddest of linguistic taboos: *revolution*? For Benjamin himself, the term was eminently neutral. Mathematical, even. Hence his focus on the various functions of violence (within his 1921 essay “Critique of Violence”), in which the revolutionary moment is associated with the pure violence of the proletarian general strike—as that collective activity in which the law (and its own preservative form of violence) is suspended indeterminately: “For it takes place not in readiness to resume work following external concessions and this or that modification to working conditions, but in the determination to resume only a wholly transformed work, no longer enforced by the state, an upheaval that this kind of strike not so much causes as consummates” [Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 246]. That is, “revolution” as the name for that foundational event in which, looking into each other’s eyes, the collective utters the silent, decisive promise: it shall never again be as it was.

2 Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 2, part 1, 1927-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 215.

3 A tension encapsulated by the infamous slogan: “the simplest Surrealist gesture consists in going out into the street, gun in hand, and taking pot shots at the crowd” [quoted in Louis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 125].

4 As expressed within the contemporary moment, however, we should take note of the manner in which this desperate plea—“now!”—is paradoxically fused with the most sober of pragmatism. At a point in which things have gotten *so* bad, only the sum of the smallest of steps, rather than the most immediate of wholesale changes, can be imagined as feasible response. Apparently, not the abrupt cessation of unnecessary (and, thus, wasteful) labour in an affluent society, but only the collective reduction of air-conditioner usage can save us.

5 In mid-2007, in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the Ontario government enacted a law to ban the use of energy-inefficient incandescent light bulbs by the year 2012. A move that, to the ears of some, rang with sweet irony: 2012 the very year in which the Mayan calendar comes to an end.

6 In related fashion, we might also cite the (bewildering) bewilderment expressed by otherwise intelligent car-owners in regards to consistently rising gas prices: “They went up *again*!” With consumer frustration directed at profit-seeking oil companies (as if there were any other kind), the objective crisis that underlies the event (i.e. the historical depletion of a non-renewable resource) is wholly shielded from consciousness. A situation which recalls the popular response to inflation in Weimar Germany, as recorded by Benjamin in “One-Way Street”: “In the stock of phraseology that lays bare the amalgam

of stupidity and cowardice constituting the mode of life of the German bourgeois, the locution referring to impending catastrophe—“Things can’t go on like this”—is particularly noteworthy. The helpless fixation on notions of security and property deriving from past decades keeps the average citizen from perceiving the quite remarkable stabilities of an entirely new kind that underlie the present situation. Because the relative stabilization of the prewar years benefited him, he feels compelled to regard any state that dispossess him as unstable. But stable conditions need by no means be pleasant conditions ... To decline is no less stable, no more surprising, than to rise. Only a view that acknowledges downfall as the sole reason for the present situation can advance beyond enervating amazement at what is daily repeated, and perceive the phenomena of decline as stability itself and rescue alone as extraordinary, verging on the marvelous and incomprehensible” [Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” in *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 450-1].

7 And it is precisely on this score—protest as viscerally compelled speech—that the foundational liberation myths of Western and Eastern thought, of politics and mysticism, are in accord: Plato and the Buddha, the cave and the bodhi tree. Significantly, in both of these myths, the protest that renders the accusation of reality public only arises after the disillusioned individual has first suffered, heroically, through the impossible attempt to possess this critical information alone.

8 Benjamin, “Surrealism,” 211.

9 *Ibid.*, 216.

10 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), xxxii.

11 Which is perhaps why the least successful of Daye’s signs was constructed around a subjective slogan (“Homelessness has nothing to do with lack of shelter”). For it is neither the habit of municipal governments to create signage through citation, nor the function of these signs to inform, but to command.

12 Benjamin, “One-Way Street,” 451.