

The Poetics of Negation, or the Reverse Interval of Punk
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Says Factory Records founder Tony Wilson, on the subject of post-punk group Joy Division, and providing something of a goth imprimatur: "Someone wanted to say more than 'fuck you', they wanted to say 'I'm fucked.'" Wilson's statement amplifies two inherent qualifications of punk. In the first place, the caterwaul that was punk music, fashion, and politics presumed an addressee, even as it refused to brook the reverberations within the very society it addressed. "Anger is an energy," sang John Lydon some years later in the guise of Public Image Limited. But he forgot to add that it is an energy particularly prone to the fantasy of self-evidence. A headline in the London tabloids of late 1976 introduced an early expose of the British punk scene, above a photo of Siouxsie Sioux, swastika emblazoned and hair shorn close and sculpted, "Would you do this for fame?" Here the repulsion compulsion is entirely lost on the development of the groups that would come to define the year the two sevens clashed—as went the chorus of the roots reggae classic by Culture, spinning nightly at the helm of Don Letts, before there were any punk records to play. If "fuck you" registers at all, someone should feel sufficiently "fucked." But the second and more poignant point I take from Wilson's statement is that something matters in the fact that one should want to admit it: "I'm fucked." And not just admit it, but assert it as an aesthetic criterion. British punk, at that post-point, was indeed at an end. It's almost as though the more resolutely politicized musical actions of the following years had done so much justice to punk's domestication, then globalization, of situationist modes of détournement that another name for it is needed. For example: the Clash's irrepressible jamming of stadium rock culture with

songs about OPEC and Mohawk hairdos in the opening slot on an American tour by The Who; the Two-Tone multiculturalism of The Specials; Crass and its learned anarchist collage work; name-check your most impressive obscurity of the 80s underground: Sheffield's 23 Skidoo, anyone?

Post-punk demonstrates that punk's negation was of extremes though not itself extreme enough. It ridiculed virtuosity where it lauded individualism; it was strictly anti-heroic. It was a kind of sidelong enlightenment positivism, which probably accounts for its nearly instant commodification. No doubt, it was a signal of permission to many who would break outside its aesthetic confines. Simon Reynolds' encyclopedic survey of the early post-punk years wisely cites the lyric by Orange Juice's Edwyn Collins: "Rip It Up and Start Again." In fact, by refusing to sound like "punk rock"—by administering the punk ethos to the very development of their poetics, rather than adhering to the means and materials they'd inherited, post punk artists could achieve the hilarity of the Dadaists—whereas, the original punks would contort themselves into faux-Ramones postures for instant street cred. These words of Tristan Tzara, who made a career of disavowals on the art historical lecture circuit, could have come from the pen of Collins himself:

...we are always parting from our friends. We part, and we resign. The first person to resign from the Dada Movement *was I*. Everyone knows that Dada is nothing. I parted from Dada and from myself the moment I realized the true implication of *nothing*.

The implication of negation is this first person plural, this inclusive bond of rupture, a kind of cleavage that does justice to the antecedent's refusal of simplistic notions of progress—there is *post* punk only if the still center of the self is perpetually perturbed. Hence, for one, the flowering of subversive love songs in the late seventies and early eighties post punk groups—“Love Will Tear Us Apart,” “Rip It Up,” and “This Is Not a Love Song” among them—the sort of which for Pistols era John Lydon had to begin as a joke. Witness “Submission,” instigated by Malcolm McClaren and Vivienne Westwood's demand that their young charges compose a soundtrack to their latest season of bondage wear fashions. What matters is not “I” but *us*—an us that is “fucked”—and that is our legacy. Primary iterations of the poetics of negation stalled at the hedonism of Ziggy Stardust and Roxy Music, the nihilism of the Velvet Underground, MC5, and New York Dolls, and generally followed a sado-masochistic itinerary whose purchase was nearly indistinguishable from the feckless hippy heroics of Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin. The beauty of punk was that it upended the conditions of such explanatory mania and embraced its own vacancy; unless you buy the bourgeois art school exegeses of Derek Jarman and Malcolm McClaren, let's call them *punkists*, it's hard to miss the degrees to which the punks recognized the efficacy of the jest. Yet, vacancy doesn't always equal the Pistols-propagated claim, “we don't care”—that is, the refusal of the available ideological spectrum. American hardcore is probably most important in breaking the waves of apathy. Minor Threat's anthemic “Out of Step,” for example, structures its propositions as negations, a list of what “we” do *not* do. It is a call to collective, direct action through the self-organization of identificatory constraint, and without the slightest ironic indulgence. Returning to the old world wit of Collins' “Rip It Up,”

“I hope to God you’re not as dumb as you make out / I hope to God I’m not as dumb as you make out.” The poetics of negation, then, looks different in the wake.

Beginning w/ Tony Wilson who, like McClaren, represents the oxymoronic punk positivism of the entrepreneur, rather than the nihilistic glee of the revolutionary, one sees that the entrepreneurial spirit inevitably infects the revolutionary spirit inherited from Dada, Surrealism, the Situationist Internationale, etc. It was McClaren who put the latter’s edict—“Demand the impossible”—on a t-shirt in Vivian Westwood’s boutique, rather than on the public space of London’s streets. The fantasy he sold was that with the proper capital and a bit of good taste, one could outwit the intractability of consumer demand. While he didn’t conceive of punk as an infiltration of mass market culture—*everyone* involved would seem to have understood that bum-rushing popular circuitry was the ultimate promise of punk—he did conceive of his *role* that way. From the comparison implied by this symposium of the grand cinematic documents of British punk—*The Great Rock n’ Roll Swindle* and Julian Temple’s *Filth and the Fury*—arises a question not about punk, per se, nor about its inheritance of the poetics of negation. It is a post-punk concern. At least for now, I’d put it this way: Assuming the value of the Sex Pistols as creative force, who did more to extend its poetics to its textual conditions, to the means of production and distribution? How did its products force us to define “entrepreneurial”? As tapping into existing means of production or building your own? And if it’s so clear now that punk is a profoundly reified phenomenon, who did the most to so reify it? From a music business point of view, we’d have to turn to the Buzzcocks, who first brought the Sex Pistols to Manchester, setting up a show for them when they

were effectively banned from gigging in London—the famous show attended by a sparse contingent of future Manchester post-punk luminaries, including Morrissey, Mark E. Smith, Peter Hook, and Wilson himself.

Now, I am trying to take care in these remarks. Firstly because, I have little interest in playing a dubious blame game. Secondly, while doing so may be the prerogative of certain historicist fashions, punk has tenaciously offered itself to the lived experience of generations, now, who in space and time participate in its potentiality while valuing the immediacy of its results; and to do so is to say to history itself either “fuck you” or to let history fuck you (ideally both at once). Thirdly, I could have never begun to put the poetics of negation that came to interest me the most into historical perspective without living this dilemma. As Gertrude Stein famously said of the dazzling velocity of reification within mass market circuitry, between “outlaw” and “classic,” “There is almost not an interval.” Just as I am embarrassed by the creeping nostalgia that accompanies assessments of punk, I believe it is of utmost importance to understand the practical and vibrant flashpoint of British punk when we consider poetics, and I must imagine the reverse is true. Taking the term poetics in its broadest and most etymologically precise sense—as “ways of making,” thus as aesthetics taken from the perspective of the artist—the first truly independent, D.I.Y. pop musical production, the Buzzcocks’ *Spiral Scratch* e.p., becomes an object lesson in the fact, not solely the theory, that the textual conditions of symbolic production are not themselves solely symbolic. Note: the title of the record refers to the negation of the commodity’s functionality—rather than carefully tempered grooves, the whole of the surface is but a

“scratch.” Its importance in the market is widely recognized: as the first independently manufactured and distributed record, and ample excuse for the creation of the independent charts, via Cherry Red Records impresario Iain McNay.

The more ephemeral, varied, and positivist punk becomes in hindsight, the more we need an expansive sense of the materiality of negation, for the sake of gauging the influence of the Cabaret Voltaire, Alice B. Toklas’ Plain Editions, Warhol’s factory, Guy Debord’s films, and so many other seemingly divergent platforms of radical expression. As Lenin observed, Marx himself can show the way, having “extended the cognition of nature to include the cognition of *human society*.” I take care not to say that punk provided a theory of human nature that is the dialectical other to Marx’s Romantic optimism in the grand march of history. But I’m careless enough to expect something sufficiently generative even from the most ambivalent pronouncements of your Iggy Pops and Poly Styrenes.

But what *is* this “interval”?

The “interval” is the nearly imperceptible force of the negative in the creation of a form of cumulative social signficatory power outside the economy of the accumulation of capital. To my knowledge the desire of this signficatory power was best articulated by the situationists: unitary ambiance. I want to illustrate this notion with what, in the creative life of the Sex Pistols, became the final salvo, “Holidays In The Sun.” A well trodden interpretive subject, this song, the group’s fourth single and the opening track of

their only album, finds Lydon harnessing a situationist-like critique against the squalid cynicism of McClaren's version of the entrepreneurial spirit. It, along with "Public Image," announces Lydon as a leading figure of post-punk, thus an immanent anti-punkist. Just as the situationists refused the "Marxist" moniker on the grounds that "Marx wasn't a Marxist—he was doing the thinking, generating the ideas," in "Holidays" Lydon can be heard forging a poetics.

Jon Savage's reading of "Holidays in the Sun" justly historicizes Lydon's mannered hysterics as he, as narrator, "stares down" the Berlin Wall on his "Cheap holiday in other people's misery." The Red Army Faction at the time terrorized Berlin in the wake of the Baader/Meinhof affair, whose core members were soon to die under suspicious circumstances in the Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart. According to Savage, Lydon's lyrics "speak of...[his] fury and terror at finding that autonomy has turned into another form of bondage, that revolutionary fantasy paled before the reality of Stammheim and that, despite the weaponry of their name, the Sex Pistols were just pop musicians. This was not just failure, but annihilation." So that, when the "weaponry" of the merely symbolic production afforded the lyricist stammers and smokes in the absence of a clear target, as he puts it, "the breakdown of the lyrics spills into the performance, as the song cracks apart and with it, the Sex Pistols themselves" (411). Oddly, this "breakdown" is one of the most lyrical moments of the recording—Savage has decided that its authenticity is as suspect as the revolutionary reach of a poetics it nonetheless, and by his own admission, exceeds. There's something crucial missing from his account.

The verse-chorus-verse structure, replete with a customary key change in the bridge that lands the listener in a normatively rockist lead guitar solo, is actually a kind of negative foreshadowing. The trajectory of the song, announced by the gradual loosening of the wall-of-sound rhythm guitar and vocal melody, is downward. Anyone who's ever been moved by rock music recognizes the incessantly descending trope that forms the axis around which the seemingly extemporaneous rant and improvisatory leads will curl and collapse (compare a bar of Beach Boys to a bar of Nirvana, cycles ascending and descending, pop and rock respectively). But as the marching feet that introduce the song suggest, this is a deliberate and concerted collapse, a kind of call and response. Rather than annihilation, there is consummation.

The familiarly cheeky lyrics ape the “sensurround sound” of a bus full of foreign tourists come to “see some history,” feigning enlightenment in the consumption of canned voice-overs—a “reasonable economy” picked and prodded by the backup vocals in the last legibly sung chorus, where the word “reason” is phonemically split, chanted, and indicted on its very Adamic terms. The claustrophobia of this willful irrationality—its apparent self-reflexivity—resolves into a unitary interval: “so when will we fall?” Now, Savage leaps ahead to the punch line, what he calls a “terrifying admission” of, at the very least, vulnerability. But it is the lines through which we reach it that issue the resolve of our narrator. These lines are marked by requisite rockist repetition. But the bizarre oscillation between what Lydon wants to and shall do, not to mention the fits and starts of his delivery, render it at once choral (since it issues to and from a plurality) and impossible to share in (much like the “rea-son / rea-son” moments earlier).

I'm gonna go over the wall
I don't understand this bit at all
This third rate B-movie show
Cheap dialogue, cheap essential scenery

The tour guide's voice-over, the frame story of the song, is as lost on our narrator as the very privilege to tour a fractured social state in the guise of a generation's spokesmodel.

I'm gonna go over the wall
I wanna go over the Berlin Wall
Before me, come over the Berlin Wall
I don't understand this bit at all

Here our narrator offers an absurd sort of apostrophe—commanding his listener to swap trajectories and defy that which can be known (and thus told) with raw, reciprocal proximity: “before me” you will stand amidst the “cheap essential scenery” you have become.

I'm gonna go over the wall
I wanna go over the Berlin Wall
I'm gonna go over the Berlin Wall
Before me, come over the Berlin Wall

I don't understand this bit at all

Please don't be waiting for me

Tracing the circularity of the scenario is crucial to understanding this last line—"Please don't be waiting for me"—in another and even primary sense to that which Savage assumes. It denotes a reciprocity that is desired, commanded, and claimed; if it seems to connote sheer self-destruction, it is only because of its willingness to reaffirm "essential" formal conventions—of both poetic and social decorum—by imperiling them.

Transcribing the rant itself, I find it both prosodically and logically melds into three quatrains and a heroic couplet, each in an almost cozy tetrameter—good old rockist 4/4. It's hardly a "breakdown" of received forms.

Whence issues these forms? From Eddie Cochran, Elvis Presley "The King," from the transgressive reappropriations of the first American musical forms—African American musical forms, an important though characteristically queasy act of rapprochement in the service of class-consciousness. In hindsight it's obvious that Lydon only begrudgingly, if ever, let up on the American mythos of punk—a reiteration of the rugged individualist—to gesture toward the anti-exceptionalist strain of British punk—think of Punk Magazine co-founder Legs McNeil claiming "lay off of my blue suede shoes" is the most political thing you can say, "because it's about personal freedom." The most resonant Pistols anthem, "No Future!" is an anti-exceptionalist statement, yet hinged on the same moral influence of American individualism that in extremis holds a dictatorial fervor.

Interestingly, on the “real punk bands” that came “a couple of years later” like the Exploited, much maligned over a decade hence, East Londoner and *Sniffin’ Glue* zineist Mark Perry calls them “working class people who’ve all got convictions,” insinuating that’s why they were maligned. Among the King’s Road set, Lydon and Steve Jones were uniquely working class, and the former has “got convictions,” to say the least; but positioning himself within the interval itself, Lydon considers doctrine of any kind, any particular thing of which one might become convinced, a kind of hypocrisy. It has nothing to do with the vicissitudes of punk authenticity, which is ultimately a kind of ultra-conformity—everyone with spiked Mohawks and biker gear, the hyper-machismo of hardcore, etc.—nor anything to do with originality in the historical sense that defines the worst bickering over punk’s legacy: New York vs. London, etc. In reckoning, Lydon remarks, “I applaud [The Exploited]. I don’t applaud the people who jumped on their bandwagon.” To so imitate is not to lack authenticity, but to substitute one’s studies for one’s queries. Lydon’s poetics of negation disarmingly demarcate class consciousness and erudition in such a way that its lessons resonate long past the ascendance of academic treatments of the punk moment, and well beyond recent decades of D.I.Y. theatrics—for better or worse grunge, Riot Grrrl, etc.

The thing is, when we *do* certain forms of cultural studies, we brook a form of historicism that relies on self-reckoning, a blithe and vaguely intuitive auto-ethnography. What becomes of “poetics” is an ahistorical narcissism the already marginalized field can hardly refute on its own terms. Yet a cultural studies of poetics is just getting underway: in the various critical reactions to the Blagojevich-esque Lilly endowment to the Poetry

Foundation, just up the street, or more readily discernable to the academy, Maria Damon and Ira Livingston's forthcoming *Poetry and Cultural Studies Reader*. And what if we treat a primary document of historical punk as a comparative object lesson in the poetics of negation that have concerned themselves with social systems rather than the bourgeois values of self-reckoning that fuel assessments of punk's contemporary relevance, whether that relevance be aesthetic, pedagogical, political, or otherwise? Up to now, the results have been "pretty vacant."

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