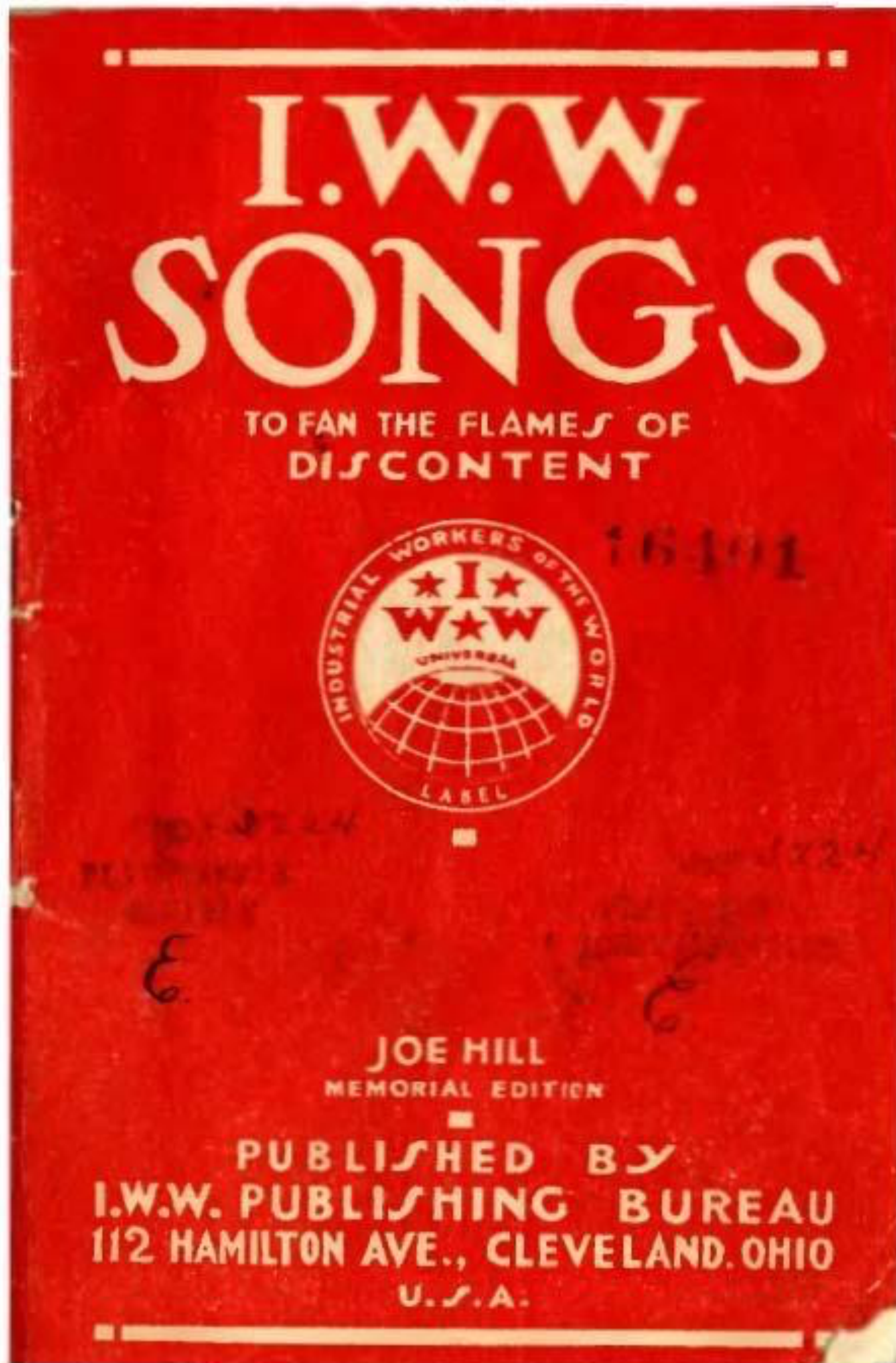
Fanning the Flames of Discontent by Caleb Wexler



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Editor's Note: In this essay, Bobby Seale quotes a poem by Ronald Stone that incorporates offensive language. The journal editors have starred out the language, without changing the source or the author's meaning, based on our sensitivity to the Honors Journal readership.

In 1966 Bobby Seale and Huey P Newton, before they founded the Black Panther Party, were arrested in Berkeley, California. The charges: obstructing the sidewalk and assaulting officers. The cause: poetry. Seale was reciting Ronald Stone's anti-draft poem "Uncle Sammy Call Me Fulla Lucifer" (outside a restaurant appropriately named the "Forum") when:

> Some uniformed pig cop walked up. He stood around ten or twelve feet away. I said, "You school my naive heart to sing red-white-and-blue-stars-and-stripes songs and to pledge eternal allegiance to all things blue, true, blue-eyed blond, blond-haired, white chalk white skin with U.S.A. tattooed all over."
>
> Man, when I said that, this cop walks up and says, "You're under arrest." I got down off the chair, said, "What are you talking about, 'You're under arrest?'
>
> Under arrest for what? What reason do you have for saying I'm under arrest?" (Seale 19)

It's Seale's question for the cop, "What reason do you have for saying I'm under arrest?" that I want to focus on here, not in the sense of what pretense did the cop invent for arresting Seale, but what makes poetry so powerful, so threatening to authority, that it made this cop feel the need to arrest a man?

Poetry is powerful, in part, because it opens a space for telling our stories and our history, and it helps us to imbue those stories with significance. An example of this is the poetry of Voltairine de Cleyre. De Cleyre was an anarchist and a poet in the 18th century whose politics and writing were shaped by the Haymarket affair, and the deaths of the Haymarket martyrs (August Spies, Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, and Louis Lingg) (King). In her poetry, de Cleyre celebrates the sacrifice and memory of the martyrs, but she does so as a call to present action. In her 1897 poem "Light Upon Waldheim"—named for the cemetery where the Haymarket martyrs are interred—de Cleyre wrote:

> Light upon Waldheim! And the earth is gray;
> A bitter wind is driving from the north;
> The stone is cold, and strange cold whispers say:
> "What do ye here with Death? Go forth! Go forth!"

This poem pays homage to the dead who "martyred lies, / Slain in our name, for that he loved us much", but more important than the act of mourning is the call to "Go forth!" The dead deserve to be honored, but this poem communicates that the best way to honor them is with our actions, not our tears, and the monument's whisper, "What do ye here with Death? Go forth! Go forth!" seems to prefigure the later call of the famed labor organizer Mother Jones to "Pray for the dead, and fight like hell for the living" (40). The significance this poem creates for the past is thus as fuel for the fights of the present and the future.

"Light Upon Waldheim" is one example of a much larger trend in political poetry, the celebration of a history of struggle. In the introduction to a recording of "There Is Power in a Union", Utah Philips relates this story:

> A long time ago I was sitting in a cafe in Worcester, Massachusetts called "Alice and the Hat" and there was a fellow sitting next to me. I was working for the laborer's union. They were doing a labour education program, and the television set was on and Cesar Chaves was on the evening news leading that first big march in Sacramento, and this fellow who'd been holding his union card for 26 years said, "Bunch of wetbacks. Why

> don't they ship 'em back to Mexico. Takin' jobs away from American workers", and I could've got mad, but then I had to stop and think, well what did he get in school, what did he get in his work experience, what did he get even from his own union that gave him some tools to understand what it was he was seeing on that television? If he had grown up with a true and sure knowledge of who he was and where he had come from he would have been a whole lot more pissed off than he was, and he'd have known exactly who to be pissed off at too, I tell you that. Well that's why we do these songs… these songs are a better and more accurate picture, idea, of who we are and where we have come from than the best damn history book that you ever read, you know? And like Clair Sparks said, a radical feminist from southern California, said, "The long memory is the most radical idea in America."

This is a long quote, to be sure, but I felt it important to transcribe in full because it describes so well the role of music and poetry in telling our history, and illustrates so well what is lost without "the long memory." The worker in Philips's story is angry because he's become alienated from people he should see as fellow laborers, instead of competitors. Philips implies that the worker shares a common enemy with Chavez and those marching with him, but he lacks the tools to see "exactly who to be pissed off at." What Philips calls, "the long memory" is not just a distant historical record, but a living past which makes the present intelligible. According to Philips, if this worker was more connected to the long memory, he'd have understood the continuity between the struggle of his union and that of Chavez. When it reminds us of the sacrifices of the past, poetry becomes the vehicle by which the long memory is transmitted.

It's a simple enough matter to preserve the historical fact of an occurrence, but Bobby Seale wasn't arrested for reading a textbook. The mere act of recording doesn't give poetry power. Writing on the importance of history, Walter Benjamin said:

> There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. ("Theses" 254)

What Benjamin makes clear here is that our awareness of the past creates an obligation to it. Those who fought and fell in the past did so for the sake of the future, and the messianic power that Benjamin refers to is our ability to redeem them, to make good on their sacrifice. The long memory, as a way of telling history, maintains our relationship to this past, makes loud its echoes, and it also reminds us of our obligation to it. This is why it is not enough for the speaker of de Cleyre's poem to cry over the graves at Waldheim. She must "Go forth!" and fulfill her obligation to the past, and more importantly, in reminding the reader of the grave at Waldheim, she reminds us that we too have been the beneficiaries of other's fight, and that this gift given to us by our predecessors obligates us to continue their struggle. Poetry therefore presents a living past which still makes demands on the present.

The long memory is one of the key elements of political poetry, and one of the best examples of this is the poem "I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night" written by Alfred Hayes, and recorded as a song by Pete Seeger, Joan Beaz, Tom Morello, and many others. Hill, the titular subject of the song, was a labor organizer for the Industrial Workers of the World, as well as a poet and songwriter, until his execution by firing squad in 1915 ("Joe Hill"). In this poem, Hayes describes a vision in which Joe Hill tells him that he "never died", and the speaker relates:

> Says Joe "What they can never kill
> went on to organize,
> went on to organize"

From San Diego up to Maine,
in every mine and mill,
Where workers strike and organize
it's there you'll find Joe Hill,
it's there you'll find Joe Hill!

This poem, like "Light Upon Waldheim" is animated by a reverence for the past and a struggle for the future. It is not enough for Hayes that Joe Hill remains alive in the memories of the living, he remains alive only in the *struggle* of the workers. It was not enough for Hill himself either; before his death he sent a telegram which is often paraphrased, "Don't Mourn, Organize" (Callahan). The long memory is only realized when it is manifested as praxis.

The poetics of the long memory is not exclusive to the labor movement. In "Easter, 1916" Yeats pays similar homage to the executed leaders of the Easter Rising of 1916. Yeats memorializes the leaders that he knew personally, but also charges the reader with their memory: "…our part / to murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child." Yeats is not as explicit as de Cleyre in charging the mourner with a return to action, but like Hayes he establishes a relationship between memory and political praxis, saying:

I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

It is not merely in poetry that the leaders' memories live, but in the continued struggle for Irish independence symbolized by wearing green. Where Yeats differs from Hayes is in his assertion that the remembered martyrs are now "changed utterly", from living people with dreams and futures into symbols of rebellion. Yeats's poem mourns what has been lost, more so than Hayes's, while recognizing the "terrible beauty" that has been gained by their transformation into inspirational symbols of revolution. In this poem Yeats articulates both the importance and the cost of the long memory. Real people were lost and deserve to be mourned. The inspiration we take from them is powerful, and real, but it isn't the people themselves. The metamorphosis of the individual only becomes greater with time as the stories of sacrifice spread and become further removed from the real person, and new poems are told and retold, but this potential for transmission is what makes these symbols and these poems so impactful and lasting.

What best displays the power of the individual's transformation, is when the same historic figures continue to be used as symbols across time. For example, the same figures that Yeats wrote about in 1916 continued to be used as symbols of the Irish fight for self determination, and continued to be the subjects of poetry and song. One such song is the famous IRA anthem, "Come Out Ye Black and Tans." Written by Dominic Behan, and most notably rerecorded by the Wolfe Tones (The Irish leader Theobald Wolfe Tone is also mentioned in the Yeats poem "September 1913"), "Come Out Ye Black and Tans" is about the writer's father singing in the streets and taunting pro-British unionists (Falvey) in their neighborhood. In it, Behan invokes the memories of past leaders of the movement for Irish independence in the lines:

Come let us hear you tell how you slandered great Parnell
When you thought him well and truly persecuted

Where are the sneers and jeers that you loudly let us hear
When our leaders of sixteen were executed?

Here we see the same figures that Yeats was writing about contemporaneously still being used as symbols of defiance decades later because poetry's long memory has kept them alive. Another notable feature of this song is that, in addition to linking the plight of the Irish to their own past struggles, it connects it to the struggles of other victims of British colonialism, such as "Arabs" and "the Zulus." This shows how poetry can intensify the importance of a present moment of struggle by connecting it not only to a local history, but a global history of struggle. Thus the poetic memory is not only long, but broad as well. Another fascinating feature of this song is its framing as a song that the speaker's father would sing to taunt their pro-Britain neighbors. The song is itself a celebration of music (and by extension poetry) as a political act in and of itself. The act of defiance celebrated by "Come Out Ye Black and Tans" is not that different from the act that got Bobby Seale arrested.

Seale's arrest followed his recitation of the anti-draft poem "Uncle Sammy Call Me Fulla Lucifer" written by Ronald Stone, and, while it may not immediately be apparent why this poem would prompt his arrest, reading it in the context of the tradition of political poetry makes clear what the cop and the crowd understood instinctually. The poem centers on the inherent contradiction of calling on a people that have been, and continue to be, oppressed to worship and serve a country. The lines, "You jam your emasculate manhood symbol, puff with Gonorrhea, / Gonorrhea of corrupt un-realty myths into my ungreased, [n****r] ghetto, black-ass, my Jewish-Cappy-Hindu-Islamic-Sioux…" ("Black Panthers Arrested") don't invoke specific figures, like the poetry of de Cleyre, Hayes, and Yeats, instead invoking the memory of whole groups of people—similarly to Behan's use of the memory of the "Arabs" and "Zulus" slain by the British empire—oppressed and murdered by the same nation that young men were being drafted to serve. This poem relies on this history to make its point. The essential tension of this poem is between this history and the demand on "my naive heart to sing / red-white-and-blue-stars-and-stripes songs and to pledge eternal allegiance to all things blue, true, blue-eyed blond, blond-haired, white chalk / white skin with U.S.A. tattooed all over." The poem may not present itself as a history lesson, but it is still a work very much concerned with maintaining the long memory.

As much power as "Uncle Sammy Call Me Fulla Lucifer" derives from the same sources as other political poetry, it also generates a force all its own. Where it differs from some of the other poems discussed in the essay is its language. This poem engages with historical tensions in language that is immediate, visceral, and drawn from the common parlance of its audience. Voltairine de Cleyre's poetry, for example, is written primarily in an elevated language that disconnects it from its audience; it's written in a way that no one in the labor movement spoke. Stone's poem, by contrast, is written in the vernacular spoken by its black American audience. This is clear from the first line, "Uncle Sammy don't shuck and jive me." The language of the poem connects immediately with the audience. The imagery it creates, such as "your emasculate manhood symbol, puff with Gonorrhea," is visceral, and its message is direct and clear. There's no room for misunderstanding in "Fuck your motherfucking self, / I will not serve."

The power of Seale's recitation was immediately apparent. Even if they didn't understand why it was powerful, the cop and the crowd understood that it was. Utah Jones tells us that "the long memory is the most radical idea in America," and Seale showed us how true that was. Poetry gives voice to generations of oppressed, makes clear the simple power of refusing to forget that oppression, and most importantly reminds us that our obligation to the past can only be honored by continuing their defiance. As Cindy Millstein said, "We have to carry that rebel spirit

in our bones. We have to feel our ancestors in us who fought for those before, and we have to know we're being charged with fighting for them now, and that other people will fight for them in the future," and that's exactly what poetry lets us do. There can be nothing more threatening to the forces of oppression than poems fanning the flames of discontent.

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