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Theodoros Chiotis's Atemporal Crossroads: A Review of *limit.less_an assembly of the sick*

Dylan Williams

Theodoros Chiotis, limit.less_an assembly of the sick (Canterbury: Litmus, 2017), 27pp., £5.00, ISBN: 978-0-9927072-3-1.

In *limit.less_an assembly of the sick*, the revolution has been cancelled. The poem, which was written by Greek writer and academic Theodoros Chiotis, sits at the crossroads between hope and despair, in the moment of indeterminacy after the defeat of Greece's recent anti-capitalist movements. It is, in essence, a poem of the post-revolutionary, that places the affective experience of the post-revolutionary moment at its core:

we pretend to be plural & in order to counter damage we come together. The best of intentions crushed by the mere facts of the everyday. The current runs faster but we have become slower.¹

Here, the activist-body has fallen out of the slipstream of history and reconstituted itself as an oddly atemporal artefact of aborted utopianism. It is this dissonance between subject and history that preoccupies the text, and that provides an illuminating example of the potential and limitations of contemporary poetry as a form of historical critique.

Theodoros Chiotis, a recent graduate student at the University of Oxford, was one among many Greek academics who assisted in the Syntagma Square occupation in Athens after the 2008 financial crisis. His poem-pamphlet was first developed in English for an activist conference at the National Technical University of Athens in 2016 — four years after the end of the Syntagma occupation, and six years after the International Monetary Fund's first successful imposition of austerity policies upon the Greek state.² A sense of the defeat and decay of revolutionary enthusiasm is easily detectable within Chiotis's text:

as I join in the revolutionary chanting just for the sheer privilege to be able to walk in formation alongside you;

¹ Theodoros Chiotis, *limit.less_an assembly of the sick* (Canterbury: Litmus, 2017), p. 9.

² Chiotis, p. 27.

a non-tunelled man of uncertain affiliation, repeating and stuttering his way initially into your field of vision and gradually out of your

consideration.³

Despite the exhilaration and 'sheer privilege' of 'revolutionary chanting', enthusiasm for this activity quickly sours within this recollection; naivety slips away and the harmonising chant decays into 'stuttering' — an altogether more isolated and unassertive form of vocalisation. Indeed, the decision to write in English, which is not the poet's native language, adds to this sense of alienation from clarity of expression. Intriguingly, this sense of despair creates a temporally sundered body. The bodies featured in the poem no longer anticipate a utopian future and no longer perform the revolutionary role of the activist, and consequently inhabit a 'now' that seems detached from any extant historical narrative. The poem declares:

all the time that was previously available to us has been sold off and will be reclaimed at a later date (with additional cost of course).

[...]

Still, these many years later in this Assembly, we continue to be less.⁴

The eventual state suppression of the Syntagma occupation has led to the fragmentation of the subject of the revolutionary, and with it, its promised utopia. Its future has been bought up and suspended indefinitely. The body — the husk-remainder of this fallen subject — finds itself in a 'now' that is characterised by negation:

Questions and problems are being made to scatter when the Assembly

³ Chiotis, p. 12.

⁴ Chiotis, p. 21.

gorges on definitions as if they were bonbons.⁵

The revolutionary discourse seems to have encountered a lacuna that prevents naming and linguistic resolution, and hence onward transmission of itself into the expanse of future history. Divestment from a utopian trajectory sees the activist-subject lose its organising structure, its very definition. As a result, we are left with a loose array of affective components — sensorial impressions, fragments of thought, and moods, but these are all conveyed without a sense of clear unity and historical trajectory. This negation of subjectivity is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it engenders confusion and a destabilising sense of indeterminacy:

we find no allegiance between body and world. The frisson of the apparent disjunction between habit and substance, intent and sustenance: "To look at oneself and find it hideous, what a job!" Now, try on more words.⁶

This passage lacks the coherence of a historical subjectivity founded on solidarity and reveals a sense of introspection, isolation and urgency. The image inferred by the statement, '[n]ow, try on more words', is one of rifling through language for new terms of reference, and sources of shelter. It implies a concept of words as disguises, certainly, but also gives a sense that a new form of utterance and naming *must* be found.

Conversely, the deregulation of the body from the utopian frame of reference gestured to at the beginning of the poem seems to unleash new and exciting affective experiences:

I turn to you, as if newly diagnosed. I turn to you, with no diagnosis whatsoever. I turn to you, as if my life exploded only just an hour ago. I turn to you, because I am yet to understand.

⁵ Chiotis, pp. 20-21.

⁶ Chiotis, pp. 9-10.

I turn to you because despair has replaced the whorls of my fingers with the patois of cicadas.⁷

The somewhat shamanic repetition here resembles incantation. While enigmatic and hard to break down, there is a sense of the body being opened-up and dematerialized — of being set free. Chiotis substitutes fingerprints, a clear symbol of subjective identity, with the 'patois of cicadas', and consequently proffers the termination of the subject and its dissipation into the non-subjectivity of the outside. This contrasts the imperative to find a new terminology for subjectivity, and demonstrates that, for Chiotis, the deregulated fragments of the activist-subject are yet to coalesce into a new structure of identity. They merely rest, vulnerably, in a loose assembly. Here, something recalls Adrienne Rich's short poem 'Benjamin Revisited', which sits as an interesting intertext for Chiotis's text:

The angel of history is flown

now meet the janitor down in the basement, who shirtless, smoking

has the job of stoking the so-called past into the so-called present.⁸

Where Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is a catastrophe that is given structure retrospectively, in Rich's image, history is generated amidst the turbulence of fragments of ash.⁹ The past must be stoked for the future to emerge. The fragments it leaves behind — the politics, affects, traumas and broken bodies — must be mixed and reconstituted into new alignments if history is to continue forwards. Chiotis locates his text in this point in time. The future(s) sought by Chiotis's largely-leftist audience (in its original context as a performance piece at a political conference), have been largely

⁷ Chiotis, pp. 19-20.

⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Benjamin Revisited', in *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 17.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), pp. 245-255.

rebuffed. A new futurity has yet to constitute itself. The fragments of the old model oscillate wildly between their two potentials — to gather and reform as a new revolutionary subjectivity, to 'go again', as it were, and, (on the other hand), to succumb and dissipate entirely. To give up the revolutionary mission and yield, metaphorically, to the 'heat death of the universe / nothingness forever'.¹⁰ In Rich's terms, we are left to wonder whether these fragments *can* be re-stoked, and if the revolutionary narrative can be pushed forwards despite defeat.

All of this begs the question of the critiquing function of Chiotis's poetics. After all, it hardly constitutes the call to arms that one would usually expect from an activist addressing his comrades. In a way, *limit.less*, rather, operates on a strangely mimetic principle — by throwing light on the brokenness of the post-crisis activist subjectivity and the starkness of the wilderness into which Chiotis and his comrades have been thrown. In closing, the poem's narrative voice declares:

Yet I remain blind. The Assembly still escapes me. If you want to know more of the Assembly, you need only wait for your turn.¹¹

Even as his poem draws to a close, Chiotis eschews any final synthesis. He provides no forecast for the future fate and formation of this assembly of fragments, nor any ideal towards which this assembly can strive. *limit.less* almost callously seeks to depict the historical indeterminacy into which revolutionary change has arrived. For a poem written by a left-wing activist, this is a stark crossroads. However, the recognition of defeat and rupture, of failure, is perhaps a necessary and impending moment for the political left. Perhaps it can be a departure point, too.

¹⁰ Chiotis, p. 25.

¹¹ Chiotis, p. 25.

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