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Of Insurrection and Its Scribes

Jason Rovito

The Invisible Committee. (2009). The Coming Insurrection. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).

“The book you hold in your hands has become the principle piece of evidence in an anti-terrorism case in France...” With these words the English publication of *L’insurrection qui vient* begins, a little less than a year after the arrests of its alleged authors for the terrorist acts they “were to have” committed, and a little more than two years following its initial publication by *Editions La Fabrique*. Following these words, anonymous, presumably written by someone from Semiotext(e), we’re granted a concise, sober summary of the spectacular circumstances that precede, and unavoidably inform, this book’s North American reception.

To be told that the book that you’re holding, presently, is being used as evidence in the prosecution of terrorist acts (in a trial which has since been dismissed by the French legal system—but, of course, that’s not the point)... Within such a context, something strange happens. Context becomes more than itself, more than just an historical inflection of the text. Within such a context, as content is swallowed whole by its very presentation, figure and ground flip. So that, just as we are made aware of its status as “evidence,” this book transforms, under aura of the transparent sleeve, into something more than communicative medium, into something excessively material—*Exhibit A*: potential source for fingerprints, *that thing which you are holding*, aiding and abetting. And truly, this book, as volume one of Semiotext(e)’s “intervention series,” is self-consciously material: the rugged texture of its covers, for a paperback, proves a relative pleasure to finger; its simple, austere design communicates its deep-blue colour as mood; its cut, which is more-or-less palm-sized, makes it an ideal object to hold while walking, to anxiously fan, or, in certain circumstances, to even wave in the air.¹ This book, in short, is most definitely and positively *a* book.

And, in a certain sense, it couldn’t be any other way, given that the text which comprises *L’insurrection qui vient* has been available for download, both in its original French and in English translation, for quite some time on-

1. In case you haven’t seen it, try youtube-ing “Glenn Beck the coming insurrection” to witness a Fox News zealot’s vigorous waving of *The Coming Insurrection*—something that would have proven much less symbolic had he employed a .pdf printout instead



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line, for free. Which makes Semiotext(e)'s decision to publish this book, as a book, somewhat curious. So much so that a cynic might just here connect the dots and excuse all of this "excessive materiality" talk as nonsense, nothing more than a marketing campaign, insofar as nothing other than material sells, excessively. But, of course, we aren't cynics—if only because we find curiosities curious, rather than suspicious. Which leads us to consider whether the unnecessary necessity of this publication, as material, might just prove to be, beyond promotional contrivance, a gesture (but, from whom?) towards its very truth.

A cop-out? Perhaps—since the text of *The Coming Insurrection* proves a little thin, taken by itself, to accommodate a proper review. Thin, certainly in regard to its quantity: 135 short pages composed with generous margins and spacing, more often than not bloated by the rhetorical technique—seemingly so-loved by anarchists—of rhythmically piling example upon example (without actual analysis), employing the comma as a short-burst of breath in a trumpet solo. But "thin" also, if not in regard to its quality, then at least to its consistency. For this book is composed, in a way, of three very different books that never quite gel. Or, more precisely, it feels as if it's been written by three different authors. Of course, inasmuch as the text was composed pseudonymously by The Invisible Committee, "signed in the name of an imaginary collective" (2009, p. 28), in reality there may very well have been two dozen authors (or, as preferred by the Committee itself: "contributors"). But, whether many persons or one, the text is nonetheless marked by the difference of three separate intentions—at moments harmonious, while most often dissonant: *the ontological, the tactical, and the critical*. And it is the virtue of *The Coming Insurrection*, when we consider it as material book, that it renders these intentions recognizable as discrete, yet mutually supportive, elements within the insurrectionary project. In the process, precisely by providing these three elements with a venue in which to find each other in conversation, almost as compendium, it silently offers itself as a unifying fourth: *the poetic*.

So that, at times, *The Coming Insurrection* reads (even if in spite of itself) as a quite competent philosophical exploration of the general question of insurrection. Or, to tweak Heidegger somewhat: we are here called to participate in the questioning of *insurrectionary being*, where references to "the Greeks" prove far more contemporary in their aim:

What remains to be created, to be tended as one tends a fire, is a certain outlook, a certain tactical fever, which once it has emerged, even now, reveals itself as determinant—and a constant source of determination. Already certain questions have been revived that only yesterday may have seemed grotesque or outmoded; they need to be seized upon, not in order to respond to them definitively, but to make them live. Having posed them anew is not the least of the Greek uprising's virtues:

How does a situation of generalized rioting become an insurrectionary situation? What to do once the streets have been taken, once the police have been soundly defeated there? Do the parliaments still deserve to be attacked? What is the practical meaning of deposing power locally? How do we decide? How do we *subsist*? How do we find each other? (2009, p. 19).

While the book provides some real insights on this ontological level—i.e. in noting the absence of the future tense within insurrectionary temporality, or in drawing the similarity between the developmental logic of an insurrection and that of musical progression—they remain brief and sporadic, largely marooned. And while the French are notorious (and largely envied) for their refusal to submit to the authority of the footnote, in this case the absence of referencing betrays a certain, if quite hushed, anxiety: that a rigorous engagement with the tradition of radical thought would expose the uneasy fact that this territory has already been well tread. If anything, the task of framing the question of insurrectionary being seems to be considered by The Invisible Committee as an (almost immediately) intermediary one, in rushing towards the book's second level of intention: the discussion of insurrectionary strategy.

It is precisely the prominence of this second, tactical, level that provided French authorities with the possibility to label this book “a manual for terrorism.” In particular, they (and the press that followed them) seized upon an incredibly short passage that refers to the potential sabotage of high-speed rail travel. Of course, the officials' reaction was absurd. For, let's be honest: no one who would seriously consider interrupting the railways—or, for that matter, any of the major communicative thoroughfares that sustain metropolitan Capital as network—hasn't already considered it, at least during late night, speculative inebriation. And, to be certain, that's as far as matters are treated here. In that regard, it would be difficult to consider *The Coming Insurrection* as part of the manual genre proper, at least insofar as a manual processes information along a one-way channel, from expert to amateur. And, as The Invisible Committee itself makes clear, it is hardly attempting to offer up any authoritative, exclusive knowledge. Instead, self-identifying as “scribes of the situation,” its contributors are “content merely to introduce a little order into the common-places of our time, collecting some of the murmurings around barroom tables and behind closed bedroom doors” (28). Which is why, if the authorities absolutely had to finger this book as a terrorist manual,² they really should have done so in regards to this, its *ordering function*—insofar as manuals, their expertise aside, prove valuable for the style in which they organize information in a “handy” fashion, lending consistent form, between two covers, easy to carry about. And, by crafting the semblance of well-ordered tactics—composed, somewhat ironically, in the imperative tense³—it's precisely this that The Invisible Committee is able to achieve: an image of what such a plan *could* (as opposed to *should*) look like; an aesthetic of preparedness.

2. And, perhaps we should presume that they really did have to make this semantic link—given the strange correspondence that leads from this example to that of the American prosecution of the 2001 World Trade Centre attacks, in which much fuss was made concerning a flight manual ‘discovered’ in one of the accused's glove compartment.

3. Cf. those subheadings which read: “Attach yourself to what you feel to be true;” “Create territories. Multiply zones of opacity;” “Form communes.”

And yet, all the same, to return to our point of departure, why couldn't such an effect be achieved via download from the Internet? Is it only the danger of surveillance that prevents The Invisible Committee from setting up its own bookface page, its own blog, an Invisible Community, complete with a forum for both ontological musings and tactical debate? What does the materiality of the book, its very *publication*, have to do with any of this at all? Here, we discover *The Coming Insurrection's* third, and possibly most ambitious (even if unconscious) level of intention: *the critical*. And, with it, an interlude into poetic history:

THROUGH ME LIES THE ROAD TO THE CITY OF GRIEF.
THROUGH ME LIES THE PATHWAY TO WOE EVERLASTING.
THROUGH ME LIES THE ROAD TO THE SOULS THAT ARE LOST.

In composing his *Divine Comedy*, back when “mobility” was hardly an undisputed good, Dante found himself an exile, banished from his city-state of Florence for allegiance with those White Guelphs who, as republicans, contested the Papacy's political ambitions. The *Comedy* itself, into which Dante is projected self-consciously as wandering protagonist, lost in a dusky wood, is something of a therapeutic fiction, for both author and reader, a book both of consolation and resolution (“determinant—and a constant source of determination”). For, set retrospectively in 1300, Dante's journey from Inferno to Purgatory to Paradise—and, in parallel, from the despair of cowardice to the happy freedom of the virtuous act—takes place in precisely the same year in which, in reality, he accepted the civic post that would come to ensure his exile just two short years later. That is, Dante chooses to set his spiritual epic in the very year in which he chose, decidedly, to make his political choice; a choice that, despite its dire consequences, he will come to accept as intrinsically good. But Dante does not reach this decisive summit on his own. For it is none other than Virgil, the *poet*,⁴ who is called forth by Beatrice to act as Dante's guide on the difficult journey from the Inferno to the river Lethe. And it is Virgil who, via poetic license, presents the damned of Hell as visceral, motivating example to Dante's initial, distracted conscience. And, yes, it is Dante's Virgil—“my master, and my very Author”—who stands in as avatar for his own historical self, for Homer who preceded him, for the Word of the Bible, for even Dante with quill in hand—for the book, that is, as object produced, as that which is and can be carried with us as model for action in the world. The book not as a dogmatic example to imitate, but as necessary material for the very process of imitation, without which there is no freedom to act. As Jean-Luc Nancy has written regarding the substance of the book; that substance that stretches beyond the paper, thread, cloth that present it: “Although the book can become—digitized, immaterialized, and virtualized as well as bound in leather and gilt-edged—

4. In *The Design in the Wax: The Structure of the Divine Comedy and its Meaning* (1999), Marc Cogan provides an illuminating analysis of Dante's often overlooked decision to choose Virgil over Aristotle—and thus poetry over reason—as his guide through the *Inferno*.

5. Nancy is here citing Mallarmé: “et le livre est pour ce lecteur bloc pur-transparent.”

however slim it may become, it can be produced only by remaining ‘for this reader pure block—transparent,’ through which we gain access to nothing other than ourselves, some to others but in each to hieroglyphics”⁵ (Nancy, 2009, p.1).

‘To gain access to nothing other than ourselves’ is precisely the critical intention of *The Coming Insurrection*, saturated as it is with references to the largely unconscious “war in progress” and the requisite imperative for us to choose our side. Not surprisingly, in attempting to represent this state of affairs, *The Invisible Committee* employs (unofficially?) the model of Dante’s *Inferno*, depicting the metropolis—neither city nor country, but the networked subsumption of space itself—as Hell. Thus, the bulk of the book is structured according to seven critiques, which themselves correspond to seven circles, each of them identified by a contemporary ideological slogan (“I AM WHAT I AM;” “MORE SIMPLE, MORE FUN, MORE MOBILE, MORE SECURE!” “FEWER POSSESSIONS, MORE CONNECTIONS!”); an aesthetic decision which seems an echo of Virgil’s insistence that Hell is ideology, filled with those who “mourn the lack of intellect’s true light.” Just as with the other two levels of the book, the choir might not find much that is new in this critical register—although the brief critique of the green economy / ecological movement as the morality of the new capitalism reads sharply eloquent. But, in this instance, the critical is not defined by the force of argumentation, whether novel or old hat. Instead, what proves so compelling, and turns our glance once again to the materiality of the book, is the virtual, vertiginous update that the *Comedy* here receives. For Dante wrote his book as a political exile, his beloved city of Florence occupied, physically, by hostile forces. And it is from writing-reading his book, from the poetic guidance of ‘Virgil,’ that Dante drew the moral strength necessary to overcome his nostalgia for the other side of the wall. But today—or, at least, so the theory goes—the inhabitant of the contemporary metropolis, fatefully caught up in the *perpetuum mobile* of the network without walls, is everywhere already in exile, perpetually precarious, at all points equally confronted by Dante’s dusky wood, itself cordoned off as parkette. As a result, in quite twisted fashion, the *private* fiction into which Dante projected himself, and which was sustained by his physical longing (for both Florence and, behind her, always, Beatrice his beloved deceased) becomes a *social* fact in a society of socialized exile. And, one step further, insofar as the *Inferno* is no longer a private world in which Dante qualifies as exclusive flesh amidst the empty shades, the task of Virgil—the task of the book—is no longer simply one of providing a certain individual, the reader, with moral guidance. Instead, positioned as it is *within* the very reality of the metropolis as *Inferno*, clouded under by its “veil of sin,” the book may also function, materially, as heraldic device; harkening back to those heralds who once designed coats of arms so that knights could recognize each other on the hazy battlefield, either friend or foe, definitively,

in the moment of danger. To glance up from the page, after having just read a stinging sentence, whose content you already know too well—concerning, for instance, the manner in which mobility leads to the subject’s participation in her own exploitation—only to just then witness this contemporary vice being committed in the flesh, by that commuter sitting next to you on the bus, who’s trying like hell to fill every second of her trip home with some kind of wireless distraction... Or, alternatively: *to see someone else holding this very book in her hands*, aiding and abetting; to snatch a glimpse of its deep-blue cover during an otherwise routine, despairing walk through the metropolis’ dusky circuits...

Thus the supreme challenge of the coming insurrection—difficult to name directly, to address via anything more than gesture, but one which we know at the very least qualifies, simultaneously, as ontological, tactical, critical, *and* poetic: “The pioneers of the worker’s movement were able to find each other in the workshop, then in the factory. They had the strike to show their numbers and unmask the scabs... We have the whole of social space in which to find each other” (2009, p. 99). To be certain, the members of The Invisible Committee have not come close to drafting a contemporary adaptation of *The Divine Comedy* (nor, for that matter, *An Essay on Liberation*). Nor would it prove particularly fair to subject their text to undue scrutiny, given that, in preparing it, they could have in no way predicted the attention that they were bound to receive. However, to treat the hype that precedes and prepares this book *as if* it were in fact Grace itself, as if, in fact, they had—this might prove, at the very least, a worthy exercise. Particularly if we consider some of the most poignant words contained within *The Coming Insurrection*, addressing as they do the political relation between the weight of belief and the horizon of perception:

To no longer wait is, in one way or another, to enter into the logic of insurrection. It is once again to hear the slight but always present trembling of terror in the voices of our leaders. (2009, p. 96).

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