

In Tomlinson's dialectic, "letting things occur" stands over against the corresponding occurrence in himself, qua poet, of a "second creation, / as intricately unforeseen / as the first" ("Fantasia in Limestone"). Seeing and making—it's Heaney's dialectic, too, but in Heaney's work it benefits from greater passion. Tomlinson, however, is quicker than Heaney to introduce layers of sentiment, and he is even more impelled to dedicate his art to peace. (To which one may object, *pace* Heaney's superb earlier poem, "The Harvest Bow," that peace is the end of vegetables, not of art.) Tomlinson doesn't write of pain with real power: "a lament of all you lose / in life's constrictions / like a wounded violin" doesn't touch it. He can't help it. He was born to be a beautiful soul. "My weightless, translucent heart," etc.

The theme that "nothing is king / in this weather-swept world" prompts his style to meet its subject on equal terms. Thus it can't enjoy salience, has no beehives in its yard, doesn't cascade toward the stupid far end of the world. The language is innocent of Anglo-Saxon grunts, tangy sensations, defamiliarization. To say that "the year is repeating itself afresh," a not untypical statement, fails to make the year *feel* fresh; it's all excess of polite communication. And the rhythms (sometimes metrical, sometimes free) never pass with a tingle into the body.

District and Circle and *Cracks in the Universe*, especially when placed together, suggest that nature poetry and her sister, the poetry of reminiscence, can't be contemporary. They want to rest their chin on a country wall and gaze; they want everything to be agreeable. In the words of Gertrude Stein's Saint Chavez, "The envelopes are all on the fruit of the fruit trees." Meanwhile, all around, catastrophe is picking up speed.

Calvin Bedient

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J.H. Prynne, *Poems*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005. 590pp. \$41.95

J.H. Prynne, hailed by some critics as the most vital contemporary British poet—a designation at once useful in its emphasis and silly, since poetry is more conversation than competition—writes poems so distinct from the sort of thing by which, say, the *Times Literary Supplement* represents British poetry, that Prynne's work might (and should) be taken for a different genre altogether. Certainly, his poems don't serve up solace or easy pleasures. Instead, their catawampous energy, disjunctive tones, and indeterminate syntax, as well as the author's unusual thematic material and harmonic planning—about which more soon—disconnect us from the automatic language

co-pilot we flip on to yack, request movie tickets, and read a poem, say, in the *Times Literary Supplement*. At best, Prynne stimulates us to attend diligently to ramifying webs of discourse and implication. His poems are impossible to paraphrase and their meanings cannot be summarized readily. Here is a stanza from “Blue Sides at Rest,” the most recent book included in Prynne’s collected *Poems*:

Partition blurred caloric engine his spiral transfusion
playful to flex, inherent tuneful quantity. Both recessive
to malabsorb, lapse of thought. Neither remembered this,
neck flushed allumette profusion, caressment. Up through
by a turn in apical thrill conveyed to famish, ingenious
breast cured to breathe. Sweet droplets immune in a flurry
laid aside get a shift. Her bevelled spectral glide furnish,
unusual: maps to gene margin prior frivolous ought soon
to lift off ransom by choice, cantilena. Flitting under her
breath in catches, bird on briar hydroxy filament he raids
a temper vane limit venture payout. Imitate less. Apart
low-rent voices motion entire neighbour despite dowel.

The occurrence of words and phrases like *playful to flex*, *neck flushed*, *caressment*, *thrill*, *breast*, *breath*, *sweet droplets*, *under her breath in catches*, and even *dowel*, which after all fastens together two objects, suggests an erotic rendezvous, although *partition*, *laid aside*, and *apart* imply separation. Another constellation of words—*recessive*, *gene*, *transfusion*, *cured*, *immune*, *hydroxy*, and *filament*—invokes medicine and biology. *Venture payout*, *low rent*, and *ransom* have to do with money. Geological faulting is often described with words such as *Up through*, *shift*, *glide*, *maps*, *lift*, *apart*, and *motion*. *Tuneful*, *voices*, and *cantilena* invoke song. Some words and phrases fit into more than one grouping.

Almost every line in the stanza quoted above includes words beginning with *b* and *f*, and throughout this entire poetic sequence, words beginning with *b* and *f* recur insistently. Such broken but recursive prosodic patterns, in this case alliteration, along with talismanic words and geological, medical, and economic themes migrate through Prynne’s entire corpus.

One temptation for a reviewer, at this point, would be to explain the dazzling array of meanings that can be derived from even a single stanza. A recent critical book devoted to Prynne’s work focuses on just this sort of exegesis, and its authors enthusiastically tease out from the poems elaborate suppositions concerning Prynne’s spiritual, economic, historical, and aesthetic concerns. And though the critical readings are both imaginative and smart, their net effect serves to invent a writer not unlike the one Borges describes, whose genius lies less in his poetry than in the fantastic arguments

to be made for why his poetry should be admired.

But Prynne's genius lies in the poetry, and its expressive life may be incommensurate with conventional explanation. The intricacies of structural development, the arpeggiated motifs disrupted in each poem but linked between poems and between books, and the highly volatile schemes of modulating tones, dictions, and rhythms offer a reading engagement that has something in common with anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of thick description. Rather than portraying meanings as either discreet or wide open, Prynne's poems performatively insist that meanings depend upon multiple modes of knowing. Shifting patterns of language, and the social systems with which their meanings are associated, show through, contaminate, and contradict each other. Prynne's work is challenging, yes, but also funny, parodic, politically incisive, erotic, and philosophical. It puts into play the most diverse range of discourses imaginable and doesn't make it easy for the reader to decide how or even with what attitude to respond. While there may seem to be similarities between Prynne's poetic practices and those of some Language poets, Prynne's significant collection *Brass* precedes the Language poetry association by nearly a decade, and Prynne has been suspicious of Language poetry's liberation grammarology, its claims for the emancipating possibilities of what Prynne describes in a published letter as "the free selection and undetermined employment of word assemblies..."

Perhaps the main so-called difficulty with Prynne's poems is that their structure is less linear or melodic than harmonic. Often, the sense of the poems comes clear as a correspondence of staggered collaborative—not serial—prosodic, ideational, and tonal projections. The choring of those chords gives rise to energized relationships and superimposed implications. Even theme is developed this way when, for instance, out of a group of ten previously unpublished poems, seven refer *en passant* to a child and a wounded hand, although no single poem is about either a child or an accident. Such references don't merely prosecute an emphasis. Really, they are more akin to the aliquot parts of a harmony. In a period sometimes called postmodern, in which collage, parataxis, heteroglossia, and atonal composition have been deployed to circumvent the unitary speaking voice, Prynne's techniques are not novel. But his peculiar intelligence, the severity of his vision, and his radical rejection of commodity culture ratchet up what he might call the truth-telling implications of poetry. Aesthetics, we know, are never less than an extension of ethics. Through five-hundred-plus pages, *Poems* bodies forth an uncompromising and original writing that investigates and questions the mechanisms of our interactions with others. Prynne's enthusiastic readers should approach his poems as Gloucester approaches Dover, feelingly, letting go of the need to see the route and determinedly master it.

So who is J. H. Prynne? He doesn't care a whit about telling you since he

makes a sharp distinction between “the accident of biography” and the writing. Still, it might not be impertinent to mention a few basic facts. Prynne, born in 1936, recently retired from teaching at the University of Cambridge where he was also a librarian. Disdaining publicity, he publishes most of his books in small editions with independent presses and usually refuses to give readings or interviews. He nevertheless has a reputation for generosity to younger writers. While some Londoners mischaracterize Cambridge as the seat of a recondite and elitist poetry community with Prynne as its hierophant, he is an integral part of various literary communities that include poets as diverse as Tom Raworth, Andrew Duncan, Marjorie Welish, Che Qianzi, and the late Barry MacSweeney. He studied classical Chinese—an early reference to Li Bai occurs in the 1983 collection *The Oval Window*; a more recent poem is written in Chinese characters—and a book of his poems in translation has sold more than 50,000 copies in China. Almost all the work, previously published or uncollected, that Prynne wrote between 1968 and 2004 has been gathered into the 2005 Fremantle/Bloodaxe edition of *Poems*, the third edition of this collected poems.

This collection begins with lyrics concerned with first positions, “the principal,” “prime,” “The first essential.” And Prynne’s early work is, indeed, invested in the poetics of a “primary writing,” which is how he characterizes Olson’s Maximus project. Prynne’s emphasis on *primes* might remind us of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the primordial” and “the primacy of perception.” Both writers advocate a perceptual relationship with others and the world as free as possible of habits, of genres of reference, of rational imperatives, or of subject-centered points of view. Prynne, at this point, hopes that “maybe we can listen to the rain / without always thinking about rain” as *rain*, i.e. as the images and associations already on file, so to speak. And when Prynne connects landscape with history and human desires, or when he claims that “twigs are inside / us,” he is close to Merleau-Ponty’s vision of the coexistence of an embodied subject and the world.

Nevertheless, Prynne has something else in mind when he invokes primaries and first states. Often he means something less like *primordial* and more like *initiatory*. In “Bolt,” a poem from the mid-70s, he writes that “first levels are free ones, / only the end is fixed....” And he goes on to say: “for me / all levels are held but the last.” As early as *The White Stones* (1969), Prynne’s poems adamantly acknowledge the inescapable mediations of language. This is one of their paradoxes, for it means that any projection of “prime” as a recuperative re-orientation of intersubjectivity or as a reconstructed originary whole is understood to be corrupt from the start. With the publication in 1971 of *Brass*, Prynne’s work begins to examine this corruption—linguistic, social, political—in more radically skeptical ways.

Prynne’s sthenic interrelation of factual information, quotation, diatribe,

digression, erotics, economics, spiritual, scientific, biological, and geophysical reference, all sprinkled with indeterminate referents like *it*, *that*, and *there*, cannot clear-cut a first position, a “mind of winter” in the parlance of Wallace Stevens. But Prynne’s poetics can break down categorical assumptions and replace subjective certainties with a sort of molten mutuality whose ethical correlative is, well, not communion, but attentiveness within a pluralized system of truth claims.

It would be generally right, but reductive to assert that Prynne moves from a complex, Olson-inspired lyric in his early poems to the wrenching tonal shifts and leapfrogging referential phrases of his later poems. There is, in fact, a great range within and between books. For instance, *Brass*, notable in large part for its gorgeous, almost Keatsian sensuality, begins with these elusively disjunctive lines from “The Bee Target on His Shoulder”:

Gratefully they evade the halflight
rising for me, on the frosty abyss.
Rub your fingers with chalk and
grass, linctus over the ankle, now tv with
the sound off & frame hold in
reason beyond that. Paste. Thereby take
the foretaste of style, going naked

But the very next poem, “Sun Set 4 • 56,” offers a different approach, one that even might be imagined in conversation with the later work of Gustaf Sobin. Here it is in its entirety:

Small flares skip
down the coal
face how can I
 refuse them the
 warm indolence
 of fancy the
solace of wheels
 muffled in sheep-
skin
 then Bruckner
on the radio & how
 easily I am taken
 from the hearth &
returned
 changed
 & unnoticed it
is the pulse of
birch tar &

molten amber
the
estranged blood
in the vein

Are Prynne's poems tedious? The answer might depend upon your expectations, your curiosity, and your sense of humor. Take for example this poem from *Wound Response* which highlights Prynne's proclivity for both quotation and his uneasy relationship with scientific language:

Thanks for the Memory

An increase in the average quantity
of transmitter (or other activating substance
released from the vrs) arriving
at the postsynaptic side over an extended
period of time (minutes to days) should lead
to an augmentation in the number of receptor sites
and an expansion of the postsynaptic
receptor region, through conversion of receptor
monomers into receptor
polymers and perhaps some increase in
the synthesis of monomers. [None
of these ideas bears upon the
chemical basis for depolarization
induced by acquisition
of transmitter
by receptor.
There is evidence

As a fragment, the last line, "There is evidence," threatens to extend the monotonous jargon. But as a sentence, it comments on the preceding lines: *There*, somewhere in that deadly boring explication, *is the evidence* for memory formation. The ludicrous abyss between scientific language's description of memory-making and our actual experience of memory is so large that the poem's title can be read as a joke. It revises the old cliché *Thanks for the memories* into the equivalent of *Thanks for nothing*. *Bud, if you think you've accounted for my memory*. No doubt, some people looking for the poetry in this poem will feel as baffled as Kafka's K. struggling to reach the castle. But others, and I admit to being one of them, find "Thanks for the Memory" both funny and, because it critiques our culture's faith in the authority of scientific rationalization, canny. The poem's flow chart is circulatory: the last unfinished line cycles us back to the title.

As it turns out, Prynne uses a great deal of scientific language and he

doesn't shirk from didactic tones. But the reader is never quite sure whether Prynne really is being didactic or whether he is exploiting the mode of didacticism to make a point that, as it turns out, undercuts its own assumptions. Take, for instance, "Questions for the Time Being." It begins with assertions about poets or politicians, those "self-styled masters of language" who "control the means of production," and then asks us who is creating history for whom. Towards the end of the poem, Prynne reshapes a line from Auden and makes four pedantic, numbered assertions, only the first of which I will include here:

Buy one
another or die; but the cultured élite, our squad
of pronouns with their lingual backs to the wall,
prefer to keep everything in the family. The up-
shot is simple & as follows: 1. No one has any right
to mere idle discontent, even in conditions of most
extreme privation, since such a state of arrested
insight is actively counter-productive.

Is Prynne parodying academic asseverations or is he darkly spoofing? Who would dare to charge that someone "in conditions of most / extreme privation" might not be sufficiently productive? Is the language merely rhetorical in as much as its means to influence someone are situated in a poem destined for a limited audience? Or is this a serious gripe? Don't we agree, generally, that those who aren't making any effort to change things shouldn't bitch? Are we expected to concur intellectually, to protest, to welcome the language as a representative type, or to go with the flow, appreciating the severity of the tone, the muscular rhythm, the diction?

If you aren't sure, then you are already engaged in thinking about the work and its implications. And so being, you are beyond the easy satisfactions, ready-made responses, and agreed-upon values that characterize a different kind of poetry. Prynne's work reminds us that poetry, besides offering a variety of sensorial and emotional pleasures, can be something with which to think.

Forrest Gander

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Lee Harwood, *Collected Poems*. Exeter: Shearsman, 2004. 521pp. \$28

Easy poetry isn't worth reading twice. But the same can't be said for the poetry of *ease*. Lee Harwood is a giant of this kind of poetry, which might include considerations of natural beauty, assurances of love's bounties, gratitude for