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# ‘Controlled Amazement’

*Jim Keery*

*Poems* by J. H. Prynne. Bloodaxe Books, 2005. £15. ISBN 1-85224-656-1

‘NOBODY CAN LIKE ... the recent poetry of J. H. Prynne, and those who say they do are elitist scum.’ Sean Bonney reports this entertaining remark in *Academy Zappa: Proceedings of the First International Conference of Esemplastic Zappology*, which ‘unlocks the many hidden secrets behind the genius, inspiration, absurdity and importance of Frank Zappa’.<sup>1</sup> It also conveys the excitement of the music for ‘intelligent and thrill-seeking persons’, to borrow Andrew Duncan’s alternative description of Prynne’s target audience.

The new *Poems* adds over a hundred pages to the first Bloodaxe edition (1999), plus a ‘previously unpublished collection’, like a boxed CD set with bonus tracks. This marvellous book has ‘many hidden secrets’ of its own, but an informal *Academy Prynne* has been busy unlocking them. The best interpreters are Neil Reeve and Richard Kerridge, who acknowledge its ‘seemingly alienating devices’, but repudiate the position adopted by many critics for whom its resistance to bourgeois consumption, if not its ‘virtual unreadability’, is the whole point.<sup>2</sup> Intriguingly, most critics who take this line, derived from Theodor Adorno, seem to have sought refuge in Prynne’s ‘recent poetry’, conceding the intelligibility of the greater part of forty years’ work. For my money, early or late, his poetry outshines any conceivable product of programmatic ‘unreadability’:

The brietal perfusion makes a controlled  
amazement and trustingly we walk there, speak  
fluently on that same level of sound;  
white murmur ferries the clauses to the true  
centre of the sleep forum. The river  
glints in harmony, by tribute from the darker  
folds of that guttural landscape which  
lie drawn up under our touch. Blue-green to yellow  
in memory beyond the gold number: the

<sup>1</sup> Sean Bonney, ‘Trout Mask Replica: A Dagger in the Head of *Mojo Man*’, in Ben Watson and Esther Leslie (eds.), *Academy Zappa* (London 2005) p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool 1995) pp. viii, 1.

tones and sweetness confuse in saline.

'Treatment in the Field' (*Wound Response*, 1974) has the tangibility of the 'Ode to a Nightingale', which is echoed in its patterned indentation. As if anaesthetised by Brietal, or Keats's 'dull opiate', the speaker has been lulled into a 'waking dream' of heightened awareness. 'Controlled | amazement' is as apt a description of Keats's mood as of Prynne's, and the epigraph from a volume of psychophysics entitled *Touch, Heat and Pain* would have fascinated Keats.<sup>3</sup> It records 'observations made on patients whose middle ear had been opened in such a way that a cotton electrode soaked in normal saline solution could be placed near the cochlea': 'Eleven patients heard pure tones whose pitch corresponded to the frequency of the sinusoidal voltage applied to the electrode ... One patient reported gustatory sensations.'

Synaesthesia permeates the poem, which aspires to a 'harmony' of almost ineffable 'pure tones' and a beauty 'beyond' even the 'gold number', i.e. the irrational constant of divine proportion, *Phi*. The closing line contains all five open vowels: 'tones'; 'sweetness'; 'confuse'; 'saline'. Yet this is something more humane than a post-symbolist epiphany. In context, the word 'confuse' is unexpectedly poignant. The experiment involves a literal insertion of salt into a *wound*. Much of Prynne's writing is the complex *response* of an intensely serious, often anguished, sensibility; or, in Keats's startlingly psychophysical terms, 'an electral changing misery' in the face of 'the miseries of the world' ('The Fall of Hyperion').

The final stanza of *Into the Day* (1972) enacts another allegorical journey to 'the true centre':

After feints the heart steadies,  
pointwise invariant, by the drown'd  
light of her fire. In the set course  
we pass layer after layer, loving  
what we still know. It is  
an estranged passion, but true,  
the daughter willed back by blue eyes,  
unscathed down the central  
pain pathway. Timelike delirium  
cools at this crossing, with your head  
in my arms. The ship steadies  
and the bird also, from frenzy  
to darker fields we go.

<sup>3</sup> A. V. S. Reuck and Julie Knight (eds.), *Touch, Heat and Pain: A Ciba Foundation Symposium* (London 1966) p. 11.

This is vintage Prynne. The evocation of constancy in a lifelong course draws on the mythopoeic tradition, but also, again, on mathematics ('invariance' is the quality of remaining unchanged in a transformation; on a 'pointwise invariant' line, no point at all would be moved) and psychophysics (in which the 'central pain pathway' is distinct from the 'peripheral sensory pathway'). The idea of 'loving | what we still know', together with the archaism 'drown'd', recalls the gentle reproof by Piccarda Donati, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: 'The quality of love stilleth our will and maketh us long only for what we have, and giveth us no other thirst.' 'Blessed in the slowest of the spheres' because of her 'faithfulness marred by inconstancy', Piccarda dwells in 'beams of eternal life', but vanishes 'like a weight through deep water': hence, perhaps, 'the drown'd | light of her fire'.

The 'daughter willed back' suggests the story of Jairus' daughter, raised by Jesus from the dead (Mark 5: 35–43), while the daughter who passes 'unscathed down the central | pain pathway' (alongside the earlier image of 'travellers come to the gate') recalls the 'crossing' of Much-afraid in *The Pilgrim's Progress*: 'The last words of Mr Despondency were, Farewell, night; welcome, day! His daughter went through the river singing, but none could understand what she said.' It is only after these suggestions have been taken that the initial pun on 'Faint-Heart' and 'feint lines' is likely to register. Prynne's protagonists move into 'darker fields', but also, like the pilgrims, *Into the Day*.

One of Bunyan's angels, or 'Shining Ones', appears in 'East-South-East' (c.1970):

The light pleating  
the rain. Coming from Hitchin  
the way twisted under some  
  
trees & I met there the Shining One. No  
conversation or investment followed, the  
rain was incessant; there was a completely  
steady flow of change. The damp was ionised,  
  
with charges slipping down quite  
unmatched paths, it was a most  
beautiful and painless night.

In electronics, signals can be safely switched via 'matched paths'; but 'charges slipping down ... unmatched paths' would be likely, in Adorno's terms, to interrupt communication. Yet the twisted path, the pleated rain and the electronic glitch are also images of the 'crossing', or, as Prynne calls it in several poems, the 'twist-point'. Its primary connotation is the intersection of 'Timelike delirium' with timelessness or immortality.

In aerodynamics, 'steady flow' is a state in which there is no sudden change, such as that of a cruising plane or a hovering helicopter or bird; a plane in turbulence, or a bird or helicopter in flight, would be in a state of unsteady flow. The difference it makes if the gases in the 'flow' are 'ionised' is that electromagnetic 'charges' are generated in the plasma. In Prynne's stoical evocation of 'electral changing' bliss, a 'painless night' along 'the central | pain pathway', the 'Shining One' is thus imagined as *hovering* in 'steady flow'.

Preoccupation with the aerodynamics of angels associates Prynne with a circle centred on Cambridge in the 1960s. Rupert Sheldrake, co-author of *The Physics of Angels* (1996), was a Fellow at Clare during the gestation of his controversial first book on 'morphic resonance'.<sup>4</sup> Having paid tribute to the Epiphany Philosophers, a Christian group who took bearings from A. N. Whitehead, Sheldrake acknowledges the contributions of 'Mr Jeremy Prynne', and is duly name-checked in 'The *Plant Time Manifold* Transcripts' (*Wound Response*), in which Professor Quondam Lichen delivers 'a paper on "Palaemnemonomic Resonances"', complete with authentic reference to 'Sheldrake and Northcote (*New Phytol.*, 1968)'.

Sheldrake's 'infuriating tract' was denounced in *Nature* as 'A book for burning?' and dismissed as updated Vitalism, a theory supposedly exploded, once and for all, by the discovery of DNA.<sup>5</sup> So Prynne's ironic dismissal of 'a minor | protein', vehicle of a purely selfish or mechanistic immortality, makes good polemical neo-Vitalist sense. So does the 'proposal' in the same poem, one of the earliest collected here ('Numbers in Time of Trouble', *Kitchen Poems*, 1968), to 'come off the time standard', rather as Britain came off the gold standard in 1933.

Prynne continues 'to raise the stake beyond demise' (*Unanswering Rational Shore*, 2001), but for all the 'profound mottoes of survival' to be extracted from each of the seven uncollected texts, there is as great a sense of encroaching darkness and closure. When they start publishing academic keys, it might indeed be time to 'change the locks' (*Acrylic Tips*, 2002), but as well as some of his most enigmatic writing, these high-energy constructs contain some of Prynne's most deceptively direct, such as the strophe, antistrophe and epode – or cathode, grid and diode – of *Triodes* (1999):

The scores read like this: word ranking  
under the Sentences Act gives a choice  
of tempers, arbiter's freedom to set out  
where the deepest shadows shall fall.

<sup>4</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation* (London 1981).

<sup>5</sup> John Maddox (ed.), 'A Book for Burning?', *Nature*, 24 Sept. 1981; cited entire in the new edition of *A New Science of Life* (London 1985) pp. 225–6.

With blood on their hands is a terror attack  
     on the Jewish state, Antrim west bank,  
     lemon Kurds. Don't waver, in order  
         to renounce the use of arms  
 it is necessary to have weapons to hand  
     and in hand, preferably  
 bloodied beyond a doubt. The men  
     who would use them must be free  
     credibly to do so if not to do  
     just that is to be a free choice.  
 The crime of the rational script permits a script  
     of crime in time to calibrate the forces  
     of pent-up sentence: word by word.

To whom is the injunction not to 'waver' addressed, if not to the government? There are 'scores' to be settled, 'preferably' by violence, but also by imprisonment, and subsequent release under the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Bill (1998) – or are we playing Scrabble? It is not easy to calibrate the ironies of this loaded writing, in which the Confucian voice of unwobbling wisdom is overdubbed with those of terrorist, policy wonk, dialectician and 'the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled'.<sup>6</sup> Orwell's famous riposte to Auden's 'conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder' ('Spain', 1937) may have prompted his assertion that 'Poetry makes nothing happen' ('In Memoriam W. B. Yeats', 1939). Or, on the contrary, do its 'Sentences Act', as in J. L. Austin's speech act theory? Since the link between release of prisoners and the decommissioning of arms was controversial during the passage of the Bill, this poem might seriously be considered as an intervention in the debate.

It is also a further contention against the 'sentence' of death itself. Its 'deepest shadows' fall over these poems, as in the final stanza of the wonderful new collection, *Blue Slides at Rest*:

Go down in earth like a feather, front brace. Left over  
 unrightful semblant will punish devoted machine knit  
 parapet. Nip and tuck miniature grounded so. Into this  
 world of darkness, of a kin deducted justified reproved  
 to end without, companion hooded unseen. Attempt thus  
 cut down as had never. Go with me. Within segment floss  
 honour bright missing, on foot. Ignorant paramount will  
 cadge a ride cranky dope appeal months and years, tell  
 in mish-mash certainty head to black on. Better broken

<sup>6</sup> George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', repr. in *Selected Essays* (London 1957) p. 37.

keep house yielding softly gnomish cataract depressed  
 inwardly sent away. In care from hers avoidance transit  
 accept in strong wardship, order holding trace and lock.

The penultimate sentence might be interpreted as an admission of defeat, of the failure of vision and of resignation to inner exile, within the confines of bourgeois domesticity. The last word in the book, accordingly, is 'lock'. Yet, throughout the poem, the sense of a pilgrimage is still poignantly strong: 'Into this | world of darkness ... Go with me ... on foot'. We must be intended to remember Dylan Thomas's image of immortality: 'The tongues of heaven gossip as I glide ... Who blows death's feather?' ('My World is Pyramid', 1934). Images of 'durance' are balanced by images of 'deliverance', and the bleak proverb, 'live long, soon rescinded', by the mystical injunction to 'know your way | through this temporal occlusion'.

Prynne hasn't lost his weird sense of humour, either. 'Cranky dope' and 'lemon Kurds' sound like out-takes from *Waka/Jawaka*. As one of 'the true gurus on this one', he shares the dedication of a Zappalogical treatise by the editor of *Academy Zappa*. Ben Watson (aka 'Out to Lunch') gives Prynne the affectionately dialectical nickname of 'Home for Dinner', a rueful acknowledgement of his situatedness in the bourgeois middle ground, however objectionable to his subtlest critics.<sup>7</sup> Anthony Mellors, for example, in a brilliant article, interprets the title-image of Prynne's classic collection, *The White Stones* (1969), as 'symbols of loss', 'the white stones of "Hansel and Gretel" that failed to show them the way home'.<sup>8</sup> The snag with this interpretation is that it was breadcrumbs, not pebbles, that failed them. The white stones led them home.

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (London 1994) p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Mellors, 'The Spirit of Poetry: Heidegger, Trakl, Derrida and Prynne', *Parataxis*, 8–9, ed. Drew Milne (Brighton 1996) p. 175.