

Selected Early Work

SAMPLER

SELECTED PREVIOUS PUBLICATIONS BY J.H. PRYNNE

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The Oval Window. New annotated edition, edited by N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge. Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2018.

Poems | Gedichte. [German translation (bilingual edition) of selected poems, by Ulf Stolterfoht and Hans Thill] Heidelberg: Verlag das Wunderhorn, 2007.

101 Poems. [Chinese translation (bilingual edition) of selected poems, by Li Zhimin] Guangzhou: English Poetry Studies Institute, 2008.

Pu Ling-en shi xuan: Han Ying dui zhao [= *Selected Poems by J.H. Prynne*], ed. Ou Hong. [Chinese translation (bilingual edition) by English Poetry Studies Institute] Guangzhou: Zhongshan da xue chu ban she, 2010. [Includes both poetry and prose, as well as essays by Ou Hong, Cao Shanke, Zhimin Li, Chen Shangzhen, and a list of publications of J.H. Prynne studies in China].

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J. H. Prynne

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CONTENTS

Introduction

9

POEMS

I. FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Force of Circumstance	21
Perspective from a Chalk Pit	22
Before Urbino	23
Or Would Like to Think	24
Littoral	25
Connoisseur at Noonday	26
Singing at Last	27
To Petrarch, on Mount Ventoux	28
Without Breaking the Thread	29
To Contradict the Weather	30
Surface Measures	31
And Afterwards	32
Insurrection	33
The Whetstone	34
Quittance	35
Other Dimensions	36
With Pearls for Eyes	37
Early Yesterday Morning	38
Given, to Both	39
Responsibilities	40
Le Verger Ardent	41
Not Kite-flying Weather	42
Landfall	43
For Someone Else	44
Getting One's Bearings	45
Fisherman in August	46
Mining for Flint	47
Quasi al Tocco	48

But Will Not Scatter	49
Towards September	50
Passing the Primary School	51
Ad Parnassum	52
Even in Broad Daylight	53
Along Almost Any River	54
Return Journey	55
Home Grown	56
Balkan Music	57
Damp	58
In Praise	59
Genius Loci	60
Over Here	61
Resins from Smoke	62
Misfortunes or Ideas	63
Snow is Expected	64
Times Trans-shifting: for Robert Herrick	65
The Hazel Tree	66
From an Eminence	67
Ploughing	68
An Owl in the Garden	69
Street Plan	70
Quite Certain	71
Nasturtiums	72
Without Fire	73
The Recoil	74
Horizon	75
Until Later On	76

II. UNCOLLECTED POEMS

Swifts	79
Salt Water, Fresh Water	80
Chi è [Cavalcanti]	82
At the Dark Centre	84
Lie of the Other Land	85
Axle Tree	87

PROSE

III. LETTERS AND REVIEWS

Letter to John Wieners, 12 October 1960	91
Review of <i>The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry</i> , by Samuel Hynes	93
Review of <i>Seeing is Believing</i>	95
Letter to Charles Tomlinson, 25 April 1961	102
Letter to Charles Tomlinson, 28 May 1961	103
Letter to R.F. Langley, 14 October 1961	106
Review of Robert Creeley's <i>For Love</i>	108
Review of Chris Torrance's <i>Green Orange Purple Red</i>	112

IV.

Some Notes on the Outlook and Procedures of the Post-Romantic Mind	115
Ian Brinton: Some Recollections of J. H. Prynne	153
Select Bibliography	157
Biographical Notes	158

SAMPLER

Introduction

In his editorial opening to the winter 1960 issue of the Cambridge magazine *Prospect* Tony Ward had commented upon writing in terms of climbing:

A writer is in the same relation to his material as a climber is to the cliff he is trying to scale. The cliff exists in its own right and is accessible only in a limited number of ways. Before the climber has taken the first decision and put his foot in a particular place he has had to search about, looking for the opportunities the cliff gives him. There are some places on the cliff which are not footholds. If the climber tries to use them to support himself on he will slip down and fail to climb the cliff. The climber must therefore respect the cliff. He cannot do anything else. If he really wants to get up the thing he must accept with gratitude the opportunities offered.

As if to echo the image of the poet as climber used by Gary Snyder in 'Riprap', published by Origin Press the year before the publication of that issue of *Prospect*, Ward's editorial emphasized a sure-footed sense of exploration for the poet as "the footholds he builds his climb with are the words on the page as he puts them down." He also went on to quote Paul Valéry's observation from 'Cours Poétique':

Everything which we can define distinguishes itself from the mind which produced it and goes into opposition. In the same moment it becomes, for the mind, the equivalent of a material on which the mind can operate, or an instrument by which it can operate.

Tony Ward's conclusion was that the writers in that issue of the magazine shared a common concern "with the expression of the fine truth of their relation to the world outside them". The issue closed with John Rathmell's review of Charles Tomlinson's volume *Seeing is Believing*, the second edition of which had just been published by O.U.P., the first having appeared two years earlier in America from Macdowell, Obolensky. That relationship between the self and the other which Tony Ward's editorial had referred to

was taken up by Rathmell whom Jeremy Prynne had known “quite well”, according to his letter of April 1961 to Tomlinson from Massachusetts where he was a Frank Knox Fellow at Harvard. Rathmell referred to the “scrupulous rendering of visual, tactile, and auditory effects” which for Tomlinson had become “a process of self-discovery, an empirical enquiry into the exact nature of the outside world stripped of a priori assumptions”. Quoting from the poem ‘A Meditation on John Constable’, (“for what he saw/Discovered what he was”), Rathmell had linked Tomlinson’s thoughts with those of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Similarly, Hopkins seeking inscape in natural phenomena strove to apprehend in them structures which were apart from himself, objectively there, and not narcissistic reflections of his own intelligence. Tomlinson is at one with his predecessors in attempting to present the explored beauty of nature immediately rather than descriptively, so that the reader may participate to some extent in the process of apprehension.

In a second letter to Tomlinson from May 1961 Prynne went on to refer to “a sense of firm personal values in a world where centrality is a meaningless concept” as being felt and communicated “only as a passion for local and historical topography”. In the same letter he also explored the issue of “immediacy” in relation to the work of Adrian Stokes:

Immediacy for Stokes is the simultaneous apprehension of a two-dimensional surface in space: this seems to me to be his primary concern. Elements of recession and protuberance, texture and contrast, are allowed to articulate our awareness, but not to violate its separateness and lucidity... the Cortile d’Onore at Urbino (seen almost completely through his eyes) was an extraordinary experience, and one in which I felt a full deployment of my entire capacities for response.

Writing about the creation of the courtyard at Urbino, that which had struck Prynne as “an extraordinary experience” when he saw it on a tour taken in 1960 with R.F. Langley, Stokes drew the reader into a world of magical proportions:

But Luciano did not stucco his brick. He left it rough. In the second place his stone is white; pilasters are thin, plain, unfluted, immeasurably straight and smooth. Archivolts have a few deep lines. The stone, then, lies on the brick in low relief, yet stands out simple, distinct, a white magic, *nitidezza*. The unpassable space between window-frame and pilaster along the storey, or the exact framing of a window that lies back on the wall—for the colonnade beneath is broad—give so supreme an individuality to each stone shape (though every pilaster, for example, except for his place, is the same as the next), that one appears to witness a miraculous concurrence of masterpieces of sculpture, each designed to show the beauties of his neighbour as unique. There is no other traffic among them. Their positions are untraversable, and no hand shall dare to touch two stone forms at a time. They flower from the brick, a Whole made up of Ones each as single as the Whole.

To Stokes the highest achievements of visual art “not only absorb, but transform, time into terms of space”:

Objects perceived simply as related in space, encourage the ambition of every man for complete self-expression, for an existence completely externalized. Our love of space is our love of expression.

In his own unpublished review of Tomlinson's *Seeing is Believing* Prynne was to focus on the “mature style of Charles Tomlinson's poetry in terms of Cézanne, say, or Cosimo Tura” and proceeded to suggest that Tomlinson occupied himself “with the urgent problems of apprehension that these two representative artists also grappled with.”

In *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems* the opening lines of Prynne's ‘Before Urbino’ offer an echo perhaps of Tomlinson's 1958 poem ‘Winter Encounters’ in which “House and hollow; village and valley-side” had been presented as “ceaseless pairings”, an interchange “In which the properties are constant”. In both poems there is a sense of Stokes's “whole made up of ones” and the inner ferment that becomes concreted upon surface. The monosyllabic first line of ‘Before Urbino’ lays out a riprap of “thereness” and the sense of what lies beneath is given the reader as a “token”, a word which was to become increasingly important in the early

development of Prynne's poetry. The "stamped piece of metal, issued as a medium of exchange by a private person or company, who engage to take it back at its nominal value, giving goods or legal currency for it" (O.E.D.) links not only to what can or cannot be taken on trust but also to that shift from stone to metal which Prynne was to refer to in 'A Note on Metal' published in the 1968 Ferry Press edition of *Aristeas*.

The palpable nature of the light in 'Before Urbino' combines a concreteness with the ensuing image of liquidity in "flood of silence". The presence of substantial value lying beyond the surface is taken on trust here as something that "must be there" and the conversation of those whose lives are closely connected to each other in this landscape sends "golden ripples" through this palpability. In Tomlinson's 'Winter Encounters' the poet had noted "a riding-forth, a voyage impending / In this ruffled air, where all moves / Towards encounter" in which conversation on customary subjects takes place where the "mind / May lean at ease, weighing the prospect / Of another's presence". Prynne's awareness of conversation, golden words, between people may have a more sceptical tone to it as he repeats the word "tokens" and links it so explicitly to the movement of "currency". The process of devaluation with its temptation to sentimentalize the lives of other people is brought home to us with that too great liberality with which we presume to know what is, after all, "mere conjecture". What Prynne's early poem leaves us with is a stone-like presence as the light is both "still" in time and place. In the winter of 1961 *Prospect* 5 appeared and included poems by both Tomlinson and Prynne. Tomlinson's 'Return to Hinton' had been initially written in August 1960 before being revised in May 1961. The bracketed note beneath the poem's title informs us that it was "Written on the author's return to Hinton Blewett after six months in the United States" and it dealt with those "tokens of an order" which are in the process of being devalued. For Tomlinson the seemingly unbroken continuity between people and their land was becoming threatened and in June 1960 he shared his disquiet about a motorway that was being planned to cross through the Cotswolds with William Carlos Williams:

One cannot drive an immense highway across these lovely
intimacies of steep green hills and deep, recessed valleys.

The devaluing of a token is felt in the poem as

a surer death
 creeps after me
 out of that generous
rich and nervous land
 where, buried by
 the soft oppression of prosperity
locality's mere grist
 to build
 the even bed
of roads that will not rest
 until they lead
 into a common future
rational
 and secure
 that we must speed
by means that are not either.

'Over Here', one of the two poems Prynne published in this issue of *Prospect* before it was included in *Force of Circumstance* is significantly different from Tomlinson's in the way it looks forward to a different connection with the American scene. The connections between the perceiver and the perceived dominate Prynne's poem as the eye searches the "light" that appears "across / Our lost spaces". The opening line's reference to "still" suggests of course the poem's link to 'Before Urbino' as stasis and time are held together and the gap between the self and the other is emphasised in terms of both nearness and total separateness. Perhaps there is also an echo here of Charles Olson's 1959 poem 'The Distances' which had contemplated the enormous gap between "here" and "there", "now" and "then". In Olson's poem "we cannot hide", with its implication of remaining, and we cannot avoid the awareness of distance demanded "by greedy life". However great the desire for the unchanging may be it is powerless against the movement of dissolution. This urge to hold the "there" with the "here" leads in Olson's poem to the grotesque but moving situation of the German inventor in Key West "who had a Cuban girl, and kept her after her death/in his bed". Because love is so intense and alive in its feelings it "knows no distance, no place / is that far away". That said the dissolution of the body changes everything and only words and feelings can

Here is where there
Is, this shaft
Of light, seen
Through open limits.

The last page of *Prospect 5* closed on the note to subscribers that “The Editor for the next and future issues will be J. H. Prynne” and that contributions should be sent to him in Cambridge. In fact the details of the production of *Prospect 6* took considerably longer than might have been envisaged. A letter from Prynne to Andrew Crozier dated 9th January 1964 had stated that he was “now definitely in process of re-starting *Prospect*, since I can now afford it, and shall want to have things for it”. One of Crozier’s poems which was to be included in the new venture was ‘Drill Poem’, later to be included in the 1968 volume *Train Rides*. In February Prynne wrote again to say that “*Prospect* has gone off entire to my design expert, has come back three-quarters designed, and been returned with copious comment & counter-proposal.” He added, in terms of promoting the publication of this magazine, that he was really not interested “in the casual reader & his hot little coin”—after all “This is a serious business”. The serious nature of this re-established magazine is immediately felt when one looks at the line-up of contributors to *Prospect 6*: Edward Dorn’s long poem ‘The Land Below’ and his ‘On the Debt My Mother Owed to Sears Roebuck’, Charles Olson’s ‘Going Right Out Of The Century’, a poem from 1961 which would be included in *Maximus IV, V, VI*, Robert Creeley’s story ‘The Grace’, work by Andrew Hoyer, Andrew Crozier, Donald Davie, the former editor Tony Ward and four of Prynne’s own poems, that were to remain uncollected. These included ‘Salt Water, Fresh Water’ which was discussed in some detail in Birgitta Johansson’s book, *The Engineering of Being* (Umeå University 1997) in which she had seen the poem as addressing “the world from the position of the condition of being, represented by the mind, which perceives the ‘wash / and seething life’ of the sea”. Johansson linked this poem to Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ in that “its rhythms reflect the endless repetition of the waves in its stress pattern” but also went on to recognise that whereas Arnold had looked at how the milieu reflects the mood of the speaker’s soul “Prynne addresses the dynamic structure of mind and of the landscape.” More directly, perhaps, the poem addresses that distance between subject and object, the perceiver and the perceived, and places the Homeric figure of Elpenor communicating on these shores or strands as a figure from the dead. Pound’s rendering of the incident from

Book Eleven of *The Odyssey* stands at the fore of his *The Cantos* as Elpenor asks for his inscription to be “A man of no fortune, and with a name to come”. In Prynne’s poem the second stanza opens with the words “To be known”, a desire for certainty, and it heralds the venture of the mind boldly making an affront on the outside, setting a “course by the slender stars”. The figure on the shore, held in the dissolution of “the fine recess” which dissolves “the deftness”, still sees the flame in the distance which is “re-lit / by trimming tightly towards it”. The phrase “By insistence”, which follows two lines later, brings “the held poise, the field of view.”

In November 1968 Prynne put together a collection of notes for his students in Caius titled ‘On the Outlook and Procedures of the Post-Romantic Mind’. The thirteen sections of this collection of notes offer a reminder perhaps of the way in which Erich Auerbach’s twenty chapters of *Mimesis*, which had been put together in the 1940s, each opened with a substantial quotation from well-known works of European literature. The ninth section of Prynne’s notes opens with an extract from John Ruskin’s autobiography *Praeterita* in which the author describes his sense of depression whilst staying near Fontainebleau in 1842. Having gone out for a walk he had found himself in a cart road and lying down brought his focus to bear upon a small aspen tree which appeared against the blue sky:

Languidly, but not idly, I began to draw it; and as I drew, the languor passed away: the beautiful lines insisted on being traced, – without weariness. More and more beautiful they became, as each rose out of the rest, and took its place in the air. With wonder increasing every instant, I saw that they “composed” themselves, by finer laws than any known of men. At last, the tree was there, and everything that I had thought before about trees, nowhere...

In his ‘Notes’ Prynne directs his readers to ‘an acutely intelligent discussion of Ruskin’s Fontainebleau experience’ in Adrian Stokes’s 1961 publication, ‘Three Essays on the Painting of Our Time’. Writing about the connexions and differences between ‘Visionary and Aesthetic Experience’ Stokes had attempted “to indicate the gamut of object-relationship, that is, the distance between the relationship that entails an envelopment with the object and the relationship that preserves intact an independent and separated object.” His essay had suggested the central position held by Melanie Klein’s theories with their insistence upon our experience of objects, of palpable entities in

space, having a primary importance in the full and healthy development of personality. The maternal breast as an object-image of satisfaction, nourishment received from tangible shape, furnishes an image of profound emotional value that is immediate and simultaneous. In that second 1961 letter to Tomlinson Prynne had expanded on these thoughts by adding:

The heightened awareness of architecture and painting, as revealed in a finely articulated objectivity, is thus underpinned by such a theory of our earliest emotional life, and shown to be capable of a complex emotional relevance which can be controlled and subtilized by the formal resources of art. It is an oral theory in origin, which I am profoundly convinced was at the root of Ruskin's urgent perceptiveness... The tensile equilibrium between the projection of our inner needs and the resistance to our awareness of the palpable external world (the recurring theme of 'inner' and 'outer') forms the context of a full range of appetencies and satisfactions which thus articulate the experience and render it luminous, without separating it from the perceptual immediacy that Stokes values so highly.

In this section of notes on the 'Post-Romantic Mind' Prynne goes on to compare Ruskin's experience at Fontainebleau with that of the painter Ford Madox Brown:

Brown, that morning in a disgusted and depressed state, is relieved by fine weather; and 'one field of turnips against the afternoon sky did surprise us into exclamation'. When he later passes the charred ruins of a burned-out house, the family dispossessed and only two chimneys left standing, he is reminded of having recently broken a tooth, and of the gap caused by this loss. His own loss of spirits having been relieved, a kind of ambiguous remorse leads him to internalise the sense of guilt at another's loss. The turnips later form the shadowy but luminous foreground of a small landscape, which though ostensibly concerned with a harvest-scene is by 16th December still being called "the landscape of the turnip-field". [The finished canvas now hangs in the Tate Gallery, with the title 'Carrying Corn'.]

Prynne then proceeds to direct the reader to Wordsworth's 1802 poem 'Resolution and Independence' in which the primary experience, the "flash of mild surprise", presents itself with what Prynne calls 'overwhelming authority'.

Any hope of bringing into focus an awareness of the self's relation to the other will depend upon a stern purpose which combines not only the seriousness of the attempt but the guiding hand on the rudder so that the perceiver may see in the words of Adrian Stokes "a Whole made up of Ones each as single as the Whole". With this stern purpose in mind I hope that this selection of J. H. Prynne's early work will offer readers an insight into the growth of a poet's mind.

SAMPLER

FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCE

Force of Circumstance was published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1962 and bore a dedication to Basil Harvey, who had been Head of English at St. Dunstan's College, Catford, when the poet had been at school there. The choice of publisher seems to have been at the prompt of Donald Davie who had looked closely at some of the poems. In a letter to Roger Langley dated 14th October 1961, Prynne wrote that Davie "thinks print is the next stage, and no beating about the bushes of tentative modesty either. Cynically out into the open, in fact, with as much dispatch as possible. The Marvell Press, he says, is terribly slow and uncertain; Routledge & KP are much solidier and expeditious. The head man from Routledge was in Cambridge a day or so ago, and Donald appears to have put in some brisk sales talk; I am to post off the MS direct to him, and not through the usual publisher's machinery. I scuttled down to the GPO this afternoon with the precious package, and must confess to being more than somewhat excited...". In an undated letter sent from the Department of English, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, Charles Tomlinson thanked Prynne for sending him a copy of the book "forwarded to me over the deserts": "The poems add up to an extremely forceful collection with far more evidence of mind, will, attentiveness and passionate clarity than any first collection I have read for a long time, a very long time. It is good to see something set going that will mop up the new slop from the Redgrove direction and also, if I may say so, to feel that one has oneself had some small hand in helping to fuse the vision, point the arrow or whatever. What impresses in the total effect of the book is the complete absence of slack anywhere, the poems are charged & the charge carries. I like particularly some of the later pieces where you have absorbed and overcome, so to speak, the Ozleworth manner. Do I detect some Robert Creeley here & there – in Until Later on for e.g.?"