



REVIEW

Matthew Hall: *On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. ISBN 978-1-4438-8014-5, 230pp.

The poetry of J. H. Prynne has, over the years, acquired the justifiable reputation of being a radically hermetic, exceptionally challenging, formally radical, and encyclopaedically wide-ranging body of work, very much in that twentieth-century tradition of Anglophone modernism as essentially established by two poets of American origin, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, but further developed, in its American strain by poets such as Charles Olson, a relatively early, and lasting influence on Prynne's work, and Edward Dorn, with whom Prynne maintained a lifelong friendship, as well as, in its British strain, by poets as disparate as Basil Bunting, Alan Fisher, David Jones, to take three especially prominent British examples, and not least by Prynne himself. Despite this burgeoning reputation, as possibly the most talented and significant living poet writing in English, his name is still appears to be unfamiliar to a remarkably wide range of people with a strong interest in poetry and therefore the first part of this review will attempt to provide a brief outline of his work and its critical reception before proceeding to consideration of Matthew Hall's recent publication *On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne* in the second part.

Born in 1936 in Bromley, a suburban town of London sometimes characterised as the most middle-class place in England and the home town of both Hanif Kureishi and David Bowie (who moved there from Brixton when he was six), Prynne became a student at Cambridge who never completed his Ph.D.. on Thomas Hardy but who won a Mellon Fellowship to the United States, went on to gain a life fellowship at Gonville and Caius College, and became, in addition, librarian and director of English Studies at the same college, one of the oldest, largest and, until recently, one of the wealthiest in Cambridge.

Prynne's first volume of poetry, *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems*, published in 1962, was not included in the later editions of his collected *Poems*, representing his mature poetic output. The latter begins with *Kitchen Poems* (1968) and *The White Stones* (1969) and was very much, though not necessarily primarily (given the exceptionally broad range of Prynne's reading), influenced by the work and person of Charles Olson, the materials for whose *Maximus IV, V, VI* were substantially organised by Prynne himself. All of Prynne's mature work, with the possible exception of *Kitchen Poems*, published by Cape Goliard, was released through small presses, with the result that, if one was not a student at Cambridge or a regular visitor to the more radically inclined bookshops of the period in London, most notably Compendium Books (sadly no longer with us but my own usual first port of call on a lightning raid from the north to the capital, back in the day), the first problem facing the well-disposed reader of Prynne's already unusually demanding poetry was literally accessing a copy of the latest collection.

Rather in the manner of Charles Olson, Prynne's first two major volumes of poetry, as indicated above, addressed the question of what was initially evoked, in the opening lines of *Kitchen Poems*,

as 'The whole thing it is, the difficult/matter' (Poems:10), in terms of confronting the current state of the socio-economic polity of the human world, from the broader perspective of what sociologists Scott Lash and John Urry characterised in the 1990s in their book *Economies of Signs and Space* (1994) as 'glacial time'. This perspective, while it can be seen as having its poetic and poietic origins in evolutionary theory, as developed from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, can essentially be attributed to Olson, whose own primary influence in this respect, and as initially and memorably expressed in his early prose work *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), was that of Herman Melville. Even in Prynne's relatively early, work, however, there was a distinct difference in approach, in terms of the more precise, at times almost overweeningly pedantic, donnish, feel to his equally ambitious exploration of the geomorphological origins of the present, human, global, situation but also in those of a near to embarrassingly open, defiant, uniquely engaging, strain of lyricism in his writing, one combined with a waspishly sardonic but precisely informed negotiation of current socio-economic and political developments.

The third major volume of poems which Prynne produced, under the title of *Brass*, in 1971, is often regarded as substantially different in style and, by many, as one of the most radical pieces of writing emerging in the context of post-war, and particularly post-1968, Anglophone poetry. The book was published in a huge, broadsheet-sized and, as ever, strictly limited edition, savagely sceptical in tone, and followed in rapid succession by a series of related volumes, including: *Into the Day* (1972), *Wound Response* (1974), *High Pink on Chrome* (1975), *News of Warring Clans* (1977), and *Down Where Changed* (1979). In the course of the same decade, Prynne developed an even wider range of discursive reference in a form of poetry which, partly in the manner of Pound, Eliot, and Olson, explored and cannily juxtaposed an increasingly diverse range of technically specialised discourses, including archaeology, anthropology, botany, biochemistry, climatology, economics, embryology, ethnology, geology, meteorology, neurology, philosophy and theology, from the earliest times to the present, and further including reference to almost every imaginable or recoverable aspect of literature written in English in addition to that written in other European languages and, as his poetry subsequently developed, elements of the literature and wider culture of China, from its own earliest times down to those of Mao and his successors.

Subsequent volumes of Prynne's poetry included *The Oval Window* (1983), especially notable for its complexly framed inclusion of aspects of classical Chinese lyric poetry, and later sequences, often characterised as impenetrable 'blocks' of verse and themselves sometimes compared by critics to chunks of rock or forms of hieroglyphic. In all cases, the collections or, increasingly, sequences, of poems concerned, indicated an immediate, ongoing attention to contemporary developments in the world, with an accompanying breadth of referential knowledge and a constantly developing poetic approach devoted to producing ever more demanding, but at the same time often highly memorable, forms of linguistic expression. Prynne maintained his insistence on refraining from publication through major presses and from communicating with the world through related, commercially-oriented, forms of media, despite his reputed gregariousness, support of fellow poets and accessibility to students. It was only in 1999, apparently after a visit to Western Australia, that the first edition of *Poems* appeared, co-published by Freemantle Arts Centre Press and Bloodaxe Books in Newcastle. This edition, of 3,000 copies, which, despite the unusual degree of cognitive attention it demanded of its readers, sold out with relative rapidity and was followed by further collected editions in 2005 and 2015. Accompanying this more publicly accessible version of Prynne's poetic output, there appeared a number of works comprising a rapidly developing critical reception of his writing, one which further helped to enhance his reputation as one of the most challenging and brilliant exponents of post-war Anglophone poetry and, perhaps more significantly, one committed to re-establishing poetry as a form of discourse capable of negotiating, critically challenging, and aggressively resisting the negative aspects power of other, more dominant, forms of discourse, many of which the poetry itself identified as significantly collusive in producing some of the most horrific developments in human history. In one sense, this has always been a traditional role for serious poetry but one constantly in danger of losing its effectiveness and thereby in need of constant renewal.

The critical reception of Prynne's poems was always present from the earliest days of his mature writing and often impressively distinguished in its acuteness, but closely following on the publication of the first edition of *Poems* three volumes stand out as especially significant. The first of these is the short, introductory volume by N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much: Poetry of J.H. Prynne*, which in addition to providing two exceptionally thorough and perceptive commentaries on, respectively, a single poem, from *Brass*, 'Royal Fern', and the sequence *The Oval Window*, affords the potential reader of Prynne's work a series of perspectives from which to begin to appreciate its significance and understand some of the aspects of its complex approach to questions of meaning, subjectivity, and their human, social, and political significance. Another significant milestone in the reception of Prynne's work was provided in the twenty-fourth issue of *Jacket*, the distinguished Australian poetry journal, which devoted that issue to a series of lengthy and substantially well-researched articles on aspects of his poetry, including one, by Kevin Nolan, director of the Cambridge Poetry Festival and editor of the issue in question, entitled 'Capital Calves: An Attempt at an Overview'. The subtitle of this article could equally well apply to the aim of the article itself or to the project of Prynne's poetry as a whole and remains a highly significant milestone in providing a commentary, unparalleled in its precise, thoughtful, acerbically challenging, and in some respects critical, treatment of the nature, development, and significance of Prynne's writing from the time of his earliest work up to the date of publication of *Jacket*, 24 in 2003.

In the meantime, while continuing to publish volumes of poetry on a very regular basis, Prynne had also produced one of a series of exceptionally detailed commentaries on specific poems, in the form of a book, entitled *Field Notes*, which consisted of a one-hundred-and-thirty-four-page commentary on 'The Solitary Reaper, a well-known, thirty-two line, poem by William Wordsworth, whose work was often considered to constitute Prynne's own most specific area of academic expertise. This study was preceded by one on Shakespeare's Sonnet 94 and followed by another, on George Herbert's 'Love (III)'. The publication of *Field Notes* appeared to encourage the appearance of a journal entitled *Glossator*, specifically devoted to the art of commentary, and to which Prynne himself contributed a short piece on another famous poem by Wordsworth. The second issue of the journal was then specifically devoted to articles comprising 'specimen commentaries' on Prynne's own work. In one sense, these three examples could be regarded as indicative of a 'second wave' in the reception of Prynne's poetry, succeeding the first wave of pioneering attempts at interpreting an exceptionally innovative, emergent initiative in the field of modern English poetry. That 'second wave' can be viewed as having been succeeded in turn by work produced by a younger, 'third wave', generation of writers, newly appreciative of the exceptional significance of Prynne's writing.

Among these, Matthew Hall, the author of the book currently under review, should be numbered as one of the leading examples, not least due to an article published, in its original version, in *The Poetic Front*, 3, discussing aspects of *Wound Response*. *Wound Response*, a collection of poems by Prynne published in 1974,, as also substantially analysed by Michael Stone-Richards's lengthy and wide-ranging article in *Glossator 2*, explores, among other things, aspects of human consciousness, but also the nature and implications of the Vietnam War, and, as with the poetry of Charles Olson and, as in all of Prynne's poetry, a concern with the tradition and ethic of pastoral as expressed in poetry from at least the time of Hesiod. Hall's article, published in 2010, develops, through consideration of the work both of Ian Friend, an Australian artist whose work is influenced by Prynne's poetry and with whom Prynne, as Hall's article informs us, developed a long-term correspondence, as well as through further reference to a collaborative process of discussion with the Australian poet John Kinsella, a theory of 'tacit reading' intended to complement more traditional and, as perceived, static approaches to Prynne's poetry viewed as primarily derived from information-based forms of close reading. Hall's own approach in the article was itself derived in part from the notion of 'tacit knowledge' developed by the philosopher Michael Polanyi (see *The Tacit Dimension*), whose own work, including that notion, was of central significance to the later critical approach of one of the most influential British literary and cultural analysts of the twentieth century, another Cambridge academic, F.R. Leavis. The article, also refers us, again via John Kinsella, and in significantly original fashion, to the crucial significance of Prynne's poetry as a version of pastoral.

On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne (2015) specifically concerns itself, as its title indicates, with the role of violence in Prynne's writing, and thereby with a long twentieth-century European tradition of writing concerned with relations between violence and modern culture, stretching back at least from the work of Walter Benjamin, Erik Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Maurice Blanchot, Emanuel Levinas and, as we shall see shortly, Paul Celan, to more recent figures, as regularly referenced in Hall's book, including Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida. The first main chapter of the book provides a lengthy reading of a poem much discussed in the secondary literature on Prynne, 'Es Lebe der König', from *Brass*, an elegy to Paul Celan, produced shortly after Celan's suicide by drowning. Celan, it can be reasonably claimed, is probably the most haunting of all poetic voices related to the most horrific event in twentieth-century European history, the Holocaust or Shoah. Hall's analysis of the poem connects it to elements of Prynne's overall poetic project and attitude to the nature and significance of violence as he understands it, including extended and extensive reference to other poems in *Brass*, discussion of the musical elements at work in the poem in terms of its fugal construction, its relation to the 'home' key negotiated in much of Prynne's, often strongly Heidegger-influenced but also Heidegger-critical, poetry, both prior and subsequent to *Brass*, and its further relation to the appalling forms of the far from homely 'technical house' in which so many victims of the Nazis, including members of Celan's family, were forced to confront their end. In addition, the poem, Prynne's later essay, *Huts* (2008), and Hall's analysis, refer us to Celan's meeting with Heidegger, the philosopher, active Nazi, and philosophical admirer of poetry, especially poetry written in German, and apparently including that of the Jewish, Romanian, but German-speaking, Celan, as representative of what Heidegger, with good reason, regarded as one of the most profound examples of contemporary human thought.

In his next chapter, Hall goes on to consider later aspects of Prynne's poetry, beginning with a poem which has hitherto received relatively limited critical attention, *News of Warring Clans* (1977). In this context, Hall develops an analysis of ways in which Prynne relates aspects of violence to those of various forms and levels of discourse, not least poetic writing, and draws helpful attention to aspects of the myriad literary sources Prynne enlists in his dramatisation of what Tony Lopez, cited in Hall's book at this stage, terms 'dominant control languages'. In addition to noting, via Nigel Wheale's comments on the deployment of the figures of Karagoz and Hacivat in the relevant aspects of Turkish and Arabic literature, as paralleling those of Nerve and Verve in the poem, Hall pays particular attention to Prynne's use of elements of Aristophanes' play, *The Birds*, in relation to ways in which the poem presents its reader with a complex scenario of the various but imbalanced relations between warring elements of numerous factions, discourses, and closely implicated physical elements of conflict in a form of mini-epic, partly comparable to Edward Benlowes' minor, and extraordinary, epic poem from the period of the British Civil Wars, *Theophila* (1652), lines from which form the epigraph to *News of Warring Clans*. Hall further employs aspects of the French philosopher Alain Badiou's reflections on the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and those of the contemporary English poet and literary critic John Wilkinson on related aspects of Prynne's poetic approach in order to indicate how *News of Warring Clans* seeks to provide a linguistic-discursive approach that serves, at least through negative implication, to retrieve and rescue a form of language as a relatively still small, vulnerable sense of voice as conscience, expressed through those more meaningful sounds derived from the truths of a life lived amidst the warring 'noise' of specialised, exploitative systems of human language that the poem primarily and predominantly articulates. These indicative comments on Hall's treatment of the poem provide only an introduction to his lengthy and substantial exploration of the poem's own negotiation of this battle, one already waged in approximately comparable terms in the earlier *Kitchen Poems*, but extended in more powerful, if what often comes across as desperately frustrated, fashion in *News of Warring Clans*.

The third chapter of Hall's book considers another volume of poems by Prynne, *Bands Around the Throat* (1987), poems which tend to appear at least initially abrasive in terms of the immediate cognitive and aural demands made upon their reader, and produced after a gap of four years, in the wake of the more immediately lyrical-sounding *The Oval Window* (1983). The latter volume was itself also published after a comparably lengthy four-year silence on Prynne's part, coinciding with

the election of the first Thatcher administration in the United Kingdom, but was generally received as a sequence especially notable for the dazzlingly sensual, lyrical, sequence of short poems that constitute its second half, and whose imagery and lexis appear to be substantially derived from aspects of classical Chinese lyric poetry, if in characteristic, complexly refracted, perspectival fashion. Prynne apparently hurried the publication of the subsequent volume, *Bands Around the Throat*, in order for it to coincide with the start of the second Thatcher administration. The book focuses especially on relations between the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl and the complex of discursive misuses of that disaster in further relation to other highlighted elements of exploitative, brutal violence, exemplified by the “necklace killings” occurring in the exponentially charged atmosphere of the final years of repressive South African apartheid-regime politics in the same period. One of the discursive strands particularly and impressively focused upon in Hall’s analysis of *Bands Around the Throat* is Prynne’s deployment of elements of children’s verse, exemplified in a section on the two poems ‘Lend a Hand’ and ‘Running Water’. In this context Hall utilises aspects of Wittgenstein’s development of his conceptualisation of ‘language games’, indicating how this aspect of Wittgenstein’s work is referred to in a slightly later lecture by Prynne, *Stars, Tigers and the Shape of Words* (1992), a text which also concerns itself with elements of children’s verse. In related fashion some of the poems, in Hall’s words, indicate and enact, ‘how one moves from processes of language acquisition into more complex forms of thought’ (Hall, 104), an element of experience notably explored in relative isolation in Prynne’s earlier, minor sequence, *The Land of Saint Martin*, itself sensitively explored in characteristically tactful and reflective fashion in Nicholas Reeve’s article *Twilight Zones* in *Jacket*, 24.

Hall provides substantial readings of the poems in *Bands Around the Throat*, accumulating and adding to the already established reception of poems such as ‘Marzipan’ as initially and powerfully analysed by Simon Perril in his article ‘Hanging on Your Every Word’, also in *Jacket*, 24, and closing the chapter with some fascinating and perceptive comments on the formal elements involved in the particularly forbidding-looking poem ‘Write-Out’, both in terms of its role as ‘a graphic representation expressive of the layering effects of bands placed around the neck (Hall 2015: 123–24) and the relation thereby reproduced to Prynne’s constant negotiation of the restrictions imposed on any form of apparently integral form of subjective expression in the consciously dispersed registers of controlled and manipulated forms of subjectivity relentlessly negotiated in every collection of his poems.

In the fourth chapter of *On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne*, Hall provides a lengthy analysis of a more recent volume of poems by Prynne, *Acrylic Tips* (2002), one conceived in specific reference to Hall’s native land, Australia, one substantially inspired by a visit to Perth and neighbouring regions of Western Australia and one dedicated, as Hall notes, to John Kinsella’s brother, Stephen, ‘who has previously been described by his brother as an extremely hermetic artist who makes his living as a shearer.’ (Kinsella 2007: 31 in Hall 2015: 131). Hall complements this observation with another, provided slightly later in the chapter, which affords a rare glimpse of Jeremy Prynne the person as well as the poet, again provided by John Kinsella, this time from *Fast, Loose Beginnings*: “‘I have one visual memory of their interaction: Jeremy leaning up against a wall while Stephen played the didgeridoo—Jeremy seemed to be staring into himself like someone undergoing a shamanistic drug ritual, a door of perception that had ironically opened and had then gone to some place without language or name.’” (Kinsella 2006: 131, cited in Hall 2015: 156). Examining ways in which Prynne provides his own reading of relations between Indigenous and colonising cultures, again by way of allusion to Hesiod among other elements, Hall also pays detailed attention to relations between pastoral, gender, and patriarchal hierarchy as negotiated in *Acrylic Tips*, and in this context, given the extremely involved, often disputatious, nature of discussion and analysis of such concepts in the Australian context, it seems appropriate to quote a passage from his book at some length:

Acrylic Tips presupposes a nature not explicitly Edenic, but which speaks to the origins of knowledge possessed by traditional owners of the land. This connection is made explicit in *Acrylic Tips* by contrasting a Western and culturally imperialistic position inherent in an account of colonisation

with an Australian Aboriginal understanding of land use and ritual in the mythopoetic space of the poem. The exploitation of the earth endemic to patriarchal societies is contrasted with the Australian Indigenous perspective which traditionally understands the land as a living, identificatory embodiment of the people. The forced adaptations to a technologised pastoral represent a discontinuity from an ecological-based reading and the exposition of nature as feminine. The text expresses a legacy of imperial dominance as it is represented against the Australian landscape and Indigenous culture, a power dynamic that has its nascent structure in an anthropocentric colonialism which entails dominance over, exploitation of and barbarity towards nature. The characteristics of dominance reframe Prynne's engagement with the land as it is linked to the pastoral elegy, a reframing notable not only in *Acrylic Tips* but also in the collection *Brass* and the poem *Refuse Collection*. (129–130)

It is to an analysis of the last-mentioned work, *Refuse Collection* (2004) that Hall turns in the fifth and final main chapter of his own book. Here, physical violence, administered in a manner and in circumstances degrading both to its victims and its perpetrators, at all levels, is clearly the primary concern of a long poem apparently written with unusual rapidity, even by Prynne's standards. The poem, as Hall indicates in detail, provides an interpretation of and response to 'the publication of photographs depicting the torture and abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib at the hands of U.S. military personnel.' (Hall, 168). Hall's analysis negotiates, in especially focused and strenuous terms, the implications not only of the event but the ways in which notions of political democracy, public speech, and poetic language can interact in order to challenge the social modes of control which allow such atrocities to occur. While providing consideration of the poem's precise use of linguistic elements in relation to the events it witnesses, Hall includes a particularly substantial thread of politico-philosophical and closely related discourses, as represented by relevant aspects of the work of thinkers who include Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Elizabeth Grosz, Juergen Habermas, Susan Sontag, Michael Warner (with reference to his notably interesting and, in terms of Hall's analysis and Prynne's poem, especially pertinent, article 'Publics and Counterpublics,') and Slavoj Zizek in an attempt to do justice to the significance and difficulty of bearing sufficiently effective witness to one of the numerous atrocities carried out by Western governments in the name of democracy and freedom.

The poetry of J.H. Prynne, as is now increasingly acknowledged, constitutes one of the most impressive and formidable attempts to develop a form of poetic discourse sufficiently responsive to the complex of manipulative social systems in which those elements of our better human nature appear to be ever more precariously situated. Matthew Hall's analysis of those aspects of Prynne's work that he selects for particular consideration in *Violence in the Poetry of J.H. Prynne* provides an outstandingly serious and articulate introduction to the intensely explorative, critical, self-awareness of Prynne's demanding but determined and sustained attempt to take on the whole problem of systematised human deformation and our related life on earth. *Violence in the Poetry of J.H. Prynne* also provides an appropriately searching and innovative example of the kinds of mode of analysis provided by a new, younger generation of interpreters of Prynne's poetry whose attunement to the urgencies voiced in his work is enabled by an increasingly developed understanding of what are increasingly appreciated as the environmentally interconnected levels, from the micro-biological to the astronomical, and from the micro-social to the globally economic and political, of the ever more rapidly evolving world in which we, also increasingly multiple in our natures, do our best to live. With regard to all of these aspects, both of his own and Prynne's writing, it to be hoped that this is by no means the last time that Matthew Hall will seek to contribute to our understanding of one of the most searchingly significant poets of our 'post-War' period, so far so-called.

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