

Mao said relinquish space to gain multiplicity of time

—Allen Fisher

1 For the Future

The poetry of J. H. Prynne is not for everybody. In one specific sense, it is not for anybody. The dedication in Prynne's 2015 *Poems* reads 'For the Future'; it replaces the dedications in earlier editions of *Poems* to Prynne's friends, the French poet and translator of Prynne's poetry Bernard Dubourg (1999), and the American poet Edward Dorn (2005). One way to read the 2015 dedication would be to read it in contradiction with the dedications that it replaced and to infer from the substitution of personal connections for a capitalized abstract noun that Prynne intends (at least since 2015) his authorship to stand not in relation to people but to something beyond or apart from them. The idea that Prynne's poetry eschews readers – either in favour of a small group of sycophants and self-appointed cognoscenti or altogether, through a wilfully obscure linguistic hermeticism – has become an established feature of his reception to such a degree that acknowledgement of its influence is now an equally established feature of defences, explanations, and critical exegeses of the work. The charge that Prynne writes poetry the 'purpose' of which is 'to be difficult', and thereby to arrogantly refuse, evade, or simply be incapable of readerly interpretation, has taken on, over the last twenty years, a tone of antagonism markedly more aggressive than the English literary establishment's run-of-the-mill antipathy towards complex forms of literary experimentation.¹ Prynne, it is claimed, 'has been careful to restrict his readership and hide his influence'.² 'At one stage', reads a parodic summary of Prynne's career, 'as if fearing a lapse into intelligibility, he actually started writing in Chinese'.³ Prynne's own statements about his work have likely helped to provoke this kind of reaction. In an oft-quoted letter to the poet Peter Riley in 1985, Prynne wrote that his 'aspiration' has been 'to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usages; and thereby with the reader's own position within this world.'⁴ Prynne's most explicit published reply to the attacks on his writing is a brief aside in the 2007 lecture-essay 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work':

I am rather frequently accused of having more or less altogether taken leave of discernible sense. In fact I believe this accusation to be more or less true, and not to me alarmingly so, because what for so long has seemed the arduous

¹ Raine, 'All Jokes Aside'. ² Mullan, 'Prynne's Progress'.

³ Ibid. Mullan refers to Prynne's 1992 poem *Jie ban mi Shi Hu*. See Prynne, *Poems*, 379–80.

⁴ Quoted in Hall, *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne*, 1.

royal road into the domain of poetry ('what does it mean?') seems less and less an unavoidably necessary precondition for successful reading.⁵

Such replies are hardly likely (or, for that matter, intended) to reconcile Prynne's detractors to his work. They are much more likely to further incense those for whom his poetry is either an elaborate inside joke or the ramblings of a deluded solipsist. The accusations Prynne refers to have only sharpened in the intervening years: in 2016, the *TLS* dubbed him 'the magus of incomprehensibility'.⁶ The authors of these claims seem not to be persuaded, by the swathes of published critical interpretations of Prynne's poetry from the 1960s to the present day, that his is a poetry with one of the most dedicated readerships in contemporary literature.⁷ When this attention is acknowledged, it emboldens, rather than mollifies, the attacks on Prynne, since the archive of interpretation is received only as further evidence of the merely intellectual snobbery with which his poems are privately consumed by an insular circle of devotees.

The seething derisions of Prynne's comprehensibility in the national print media respond, then, at least in part, to the ways in which the value of his work has been identified and championed by those with access to academic-professional channels of circulation and who are therefore inclined to read and evaluate Prynne's work according to the trends and standards of aesthetic contemplation. Prynne criticism has produced studies that examine the significance of his work in terms of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural production, situating it in relation to modernism, late modernism, and postmodernism and arguing for its relevance to any number of critical-theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical criteria of understanding, from postcolonialism to ecocriticism. It has also produced penetrating and incisive accounts of the poetry's literary heritage, contexts, and ideological preoccupations, both in terms of the inheritance of modernist form and style and in terms of the cross-currents of Anglo-American literary exchange and experimentation in the 1960s, as well as close readings of individual poems that evaluate and theorize the work's formal innovations. But even at its most penetrating and incisive, this criticism has often declined to offer accounts of the poetry that situate its critical

⁵ Prynne, 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', 132. Whilst it will be clear from what follows that I consider 'successful' reading of Prynne's work to include asking 'what it means', it should be noted that the phonologically oriented reading strategies suggested in 'Mental Ears' (see Section 5), published a decade before the opening of Prynne's archive, prefigure the extremely para-syntactical and sonically modulated lexical constellations that characterize his poetry of the last few years. It seems not unlikely that the reading strategies explored in 'Mental Ears' constituted for Prynne an early hypothesis about the possibilities of the kind of poetic composition that has informed and enabled such a prolific output as he has maintained since 2018.

⁶ J. C., 'Little Read Books'.

⁷ A bibliography of work written by and about Prynne can be found at <https://prynnebibliography.org>.

and political motivations in relation to the historical contexts of its author's lifetime. This has led to Prynne's poetry becoming an attractive object of attention from an academic research and publishing culture that thrives on the distribution and application of literary examples to theoretical concepts, at the expense of the perhaps more prosaic work of pointing out when such-and-such a poem was written, what was going on in the world at the time, and what the poetry has to say about its historical moment. Despite its breadth and insight, Prynne criticism has paid scant attention to the historical and political contexts of the poetry, and this interpretative vacancy has made it easier for those critics who wish to do so to throw up their hands in incredulous bafflement and pretend that whatever meaning Prynne's work has is shrouded in the peer-reviewed, rarefied mysteries of the latest in academic literary criticism. One recent study of Prynne's poetry, for example, asserts that the sequence *Not-You* (1993) 'generates an infinite number of readings', a claim whose stylish hyperbole practically invites the impatient cries of fraudulence that may be imagined emanating from the back pages of the *TLS* in reply.

In what follows, I do not seek to convince Prynne's detractors of the value of his work or to claim that its value is located in the very flight from 'discernible sense' that is the object of critical ire and – in the 2007 essay quoted earlier in this section, at least – authorial pride alike. Those readers who believe that there is nothing of interest – let alone pleasure or stimulation – in Prynne's work will almost certainly remain unconvinced by my reading. But literary criticism that claims a universal appeal is no good to anyone. Rather than seek to persuade anyone that they should read Prynne, or to reassure his existing readers that they have been right all along, I seek to supplement the existing readings of his work with an emphasis on the national, political, and economic contexts of the poetry, through close attention to two collections Prynne published in the 1980s. Theoretical elaboration is not absent from my analysis, but I invoke such theory in order to flesh out the historically informed readings herein, rather than to refer the poems to a conceptual arsenal that would justify their value and defend, rather than interpret, their complexity. In doing so, I develop an interpretation of the work that supports an alternative reading of the dedication in the 2015 *Poems* to that which would understand it only in terms of Prynne's desire to 'restrict his readership', or to abandon readers altogether in favour of abstract concepts. In my reading, what 'For the Future' means is inextricable from the poetry's engagement with its historical moment as one in which futures are conceived, constructed, and accomplished entirely within the ideological and economic remit of late, and latterly, of financialized capitalism. Far from being against or antagonistic towards its (or any) readers, Prynne's poetry is 'For the Future' because it positively enjoins readers to

identify and self-consciously occupy the same world that poems are capable of knowing, contesting, and resisting, a world in common that is perpetually dissolving into the abstract solution of everyday unfreedom before it resolidifies into the immiserating greed and moral catastrophes of the next bout of imperialist aggression, corporate dehumanization, or the same, seemingly endless, Tory government. From the 1960s to the present day, Prynne's poems bear the scars of their materialist conviction that language and language use are deeply entrenched in, inflected by, and responsive to the reality which they mediate and which is mediated by them. Their experiments, from the playfully anarchic to the arduously philological, thus respond quite earnestly to the Maoist principle, approvingly quoted in Prynne's correspondence, that 'If you want to gain knowledge you must participate in the practice of changing reality', without ever siphoning their energies into revolutionary polemic.⁸ 'For the Future' is more militant rallying cry than it is evidence of any post- or anti-humanist resignation: it is a slogan – latterly adopted but retrospectively apt – for the poetry's essential motivation towards a knowledge of the human condition as it is historically, but not, as I shall argue, exhaustively, defined and delimited by every exploitative structure and imperialist legacy in which we live. This motivation is given its most exposed expression in Prynne's poems of the 1980s.

In the last few years, Prynne's *oeuvre* has become 'For the Future' in another, more practical sense. In 2018, Prynne's archive of papers and correspondence, held in Cambridge University Library, was opened to the public. The archive contains an extraordinary amount of material pertaining to the composition of Prynne's poems from the 1960s to very nearly the present day, as well as reams of correspondence with friends, poets, and publishers. Prynne's papers join a trove of archival material collected by the library as part of a project to document, in the library's words, 'papers of poets associated with the so-called "Cambridge School", a term of disputed legitimacy which, when accepted, is often taken to denote both a component of the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and '70s and a nexus of late-modernist writers'.⁹ The Cambridge poetry archives contain the papers of some of the poets with whom Prynne developed into maturity through conversation, correspondence, and continual exchange, including some associated with the privately circulated poetry worksheet *The English Intelligencer* in the mid-1960s, such as David Chaloner, Andrew Crozier, Jeremy Hilton, John James, and Peter Riley. The archive also includes

⁸ Mao, *An Anthology of His Writings*, 205. Prynne quotes Mao's advice in a letter to Douglas Oliver, 23 October 1991. MS Add.10144, J. H. Prynne Papers, University of Cambridge Library.

⁹ Cambridge University Library, 'Cambridge School Poets'.

papers of Prynne's contemporaries or near-contemporaries whose names evoke varying degrees of association with the 'Cambridge School', such as Anthony Barnett, Michael Haslam, Tom Raworth, Denise Riley, and John Riley. The archive represents, in part, the papers and correspondence of a community of poets that scholarship has only just begun to account for and interpret.

Prynne's papers reveal that he assembled and preserved files of photocopies, newspaper clippings, articles, and various other textual source materials, specifically relating to almost every collection of poems he wrote and published since the 1960s. Such assembly and preservation speak both to Prynne's compositional practice and to his sense of the legacy of that practice. What does it say about Prynne's poetry that he has actively sought, late in his life, to encourage public access to the textual source materials of the vast majority of his writing output of the last half a century, materials that he has assiduously collated over the course of his career but which have remained out of reach to most of his readers until very recently? Speculation on Prynne's authorial motivations might raise any number of possible answers to this question, and I will here restrict myself to what seem to me to be the two most likely. The most immediately plausible answer is that Prynne conceives of the archival materials as part of the work of poetry that produces, but is not therefore terminated by, finished poems; or at least, that finished poems are an ongoing negotiation with their source materials that require an understanding of the language base they draw upon for their spirit of philological enquiry to be properly historicized. On these terms, the opening of the archive is a late invitation to readers to study the sources and local inspirations for the poems, the better to understand both their immediate contexts and the ways in which they attempt to interrogate or transcend these contexts. In my response to this invitation, I seek less to divine Prynne's conception of poetical labour than to read the poems themselves. Another answer to the question of Prynne's motivations in opening the archive has to do with the relationships between his work and that of his contemporaries more generally, represented by the papers of those above-named poets (and others) held in Cambridge and by sundry other archival collections of papers and manuscripts, including (to name only a few) those of Edward Dorn, Barry MacSweeney, Anna Mendelssohn, Douglas Oliver, and Charles Olson. The opening of Prynne's archives puts the sources of his work – textual, inspirational, and epistolary – amongst the publicly held archives of poets with and through whom Prynne's poetic practice has developed over the course of his life.

Whatever the answers given to the question posed above, it is difficult not to discern in the opening of Prynne's archive a certain strain of authorial anxiety about the work's reception since 2018, whether in the form of a defensive riposte to the accusations of 'incomprehensibility' (as if Prynne were saying, 'attend to these texts/objects and you'll see what I mean') or as a more selfless, though no less anxious, indication of a process of social sense-making that is essential to any poetic community (as if Prynne were saying, 'comprehension of any one poet is indissociable from the ways in which that poet develops through constant exchange with others, both living and dead; here's my contribution'). Prynne's poetry is a difficult poetry, not just by comparison with any given Craig Raine or Don Paterson but in relation to the most extreme experimentations in language, syntax, and form of the last century, and Prynne criticism has discussed and explored the poetry's complexity in this sense again and again, with varying degrees of success. Yet the poetry's 'purpose' could only be said 'to be difficult' and 'difficult' alone if the sole motivation for, and intellectual origin of, its composition was a practically infantile desire to obscure and confuse. The opening of Prynne's archive does not suggest that his poems have been unreadable until now any more than the opening of any literary archive abolishes the significance of earlier interpretations of the author's work. Prynne's papers, like most literary archives, do not contain written summaries or explanation of any of his poems. But they do contain a wealth of material that clarifies the work's contexts, intertexts, and subtexts, and they offer, as a result, innumerable avenues of interpretation to supplement the existing scholarship. The entire Cambridge poetry archive provides a welcome opportunity to deepen our understanding of a hugely various community of writers, many of whom found in Prynne's work a consistently vital and exploratory example. It seems very likely that to maintain henceforth that Prynne's poems are the arcana of a kooky hermeticism will begin to sound uncannily like an obscurantist fantasy, one that not only deliberately decontextualizes the poetry from the entire history of modernist literature but also fraudulently decouples it from the world in which all poems, and all criticism, gets written. What follows is a reading of Prynne's poetry very much in sight of the world in which it was written.

2 Philological Collage

One of the great contributions to Prynne scholarship of Richard Kerridge and the late N. H. Reeve's annotated edition of *The Oval Window* ([1983] 2018) is Kerridge's emphasis on collage as a compositional principle of the poem, and indeed of Prynne's entire *oeuvre*.¹⁰ Kerridge notes that since 'the

¹⁰ Prynne, *The Oval Window: A New Annotated Edition* (hereafter cited as *TOW*).

Somewhere Else in the Market

7

1968 publication of *Kitchen Poems* . . . a fundamental component of Prynne’s poetry has been the use of lines quoted from different sources, literary, scientific and otherwise technical, without the mediation of a dramatic speaker’.¹¹ No reader who has spent any time with Prynne’s poetry could fail to notice quite how fundamental this aspect of the work is. As Kerridge and Reeve show by reference to the materials preserved by Prynne and held in his archive, some of the poems in *The Oval Window* are stuffed with quotation and part-quotation to such an extent that such material visibly constitutes a major part – if not the majority – of their content. This is the sixth poem in *The Oval Window*’s sequence of twenty-seven:

Somewhere else in the market it’s called
 a downward sell-out, to get there first
 and cut open a fire break. Less won’t do,
 more isn’t on either. How a gang of boys
 set her face alight with a flaming aerosol can,
 “her mouth was sealed up by the burns.”
 Attention is low in historic terms and will
 drift down, seeming to falter slowly and
 making excuses for the money numbers ahead.¹²

The poem is at least as much arranged as it is composed, using modified text from *The Times* and *The Financial Times* newspapers of 22–25 August 1983. Despite the first line’s straightforward grammar of narrative continuity, the poem does not straightforwardly pick up and continue a narrative from the previous poem/s in the sequence. The line is the first to introduce the (retrospective) suggestion that the subject of any or all of the preceding five poems should be considered ‘in’ such terms, as if we had been there, ‘in the market’, all along, and the poems had been working to establish or describe whatever ‘it’ is; the empty subject of ‘it’s’ accentuates the uncanny suggestion of an established familiarity through a phraseology familiar from colloquial usage (e.g., ‘it’s going to rain’). The phrase ‘downward sell-out’ is adjusted by Prynne from ‘downward spiral’, as it appears in a market round-up in *The Times* (25 August 1983), ‘Shareholders fear 1984’. The adjustment substitutes the specific jargon of liquidation and brokerage (‘sell-out’) for the report’s more general indication of a market slump (‘spiral’).¹³ The following clause implies, in the grammar of further clarification, that the ‘sell-out’ is not only fraught with competition but inherently desirous and that to ‘cut open a firebreak’ is the desired privilege of whoever ‘get[s] there first’. The word ‘firebreak’ is split in two (it is ‘cut open’), as if to conjure the image of a broken vacancy, an empty

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10. ¹² *Ibid.*, 41. ¹³ Lintott, ‘Shareholders Fear 1984’, 14.