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Knowing like mad

The poetry and criticism of J. H. Prynne

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April 14, 2023

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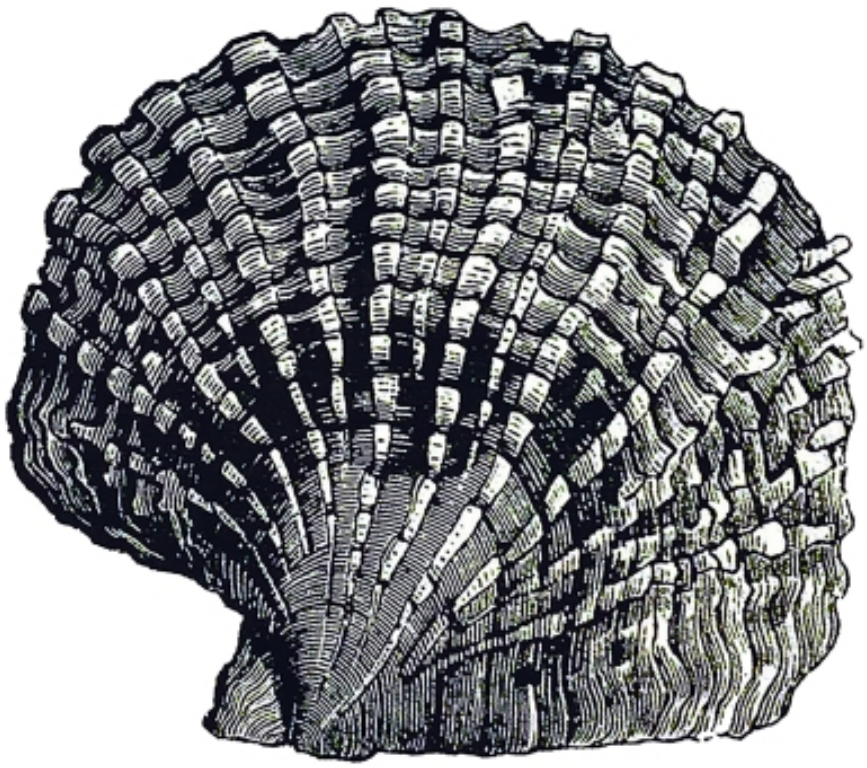

Detail of the dustjacket of J. H. Prynne's Sea Shells Told, 2022 | © Face Press

IN THIS REVIEW

THE LETTERS OF DOUGLAS OLIVER AND J. H. PRYNNE, 1967–2000
208pp. The Last Books. Paperback, £24.
Joe Luna, editor

SNOOTY TIPOFFS
326pp. Face Press. Paperback, £29.50.
J. H. Prynne

WHITMAN AND TRUTH
24pp. Shearsman Books. Paperback, £6.50.
J. H. Prynne

NOT ICE NOVICE
16pp. Face Press. Paperback, £9.95.
J. H. Prynne

> 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.

These lines, from the end of J. H. Prynne's "diurnal" sequence *Into the Day* (1972), have been much admired. The American poet George Oppen – an austere judge, his tastes formed on high modernism – wrote to its author: "Can scarcely credit the existence of the last poem … its incredible beauty." Douglas Oliver, Prynne's friend and contemporary, told him: "the sequence is patient and … that patience is beautiful". Beautiful, but also true: "the most considerable thing I can say about the last poem is quite simply that it is correct".

Being correct has been a passion for Prynne. Appointed a fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge in 1962, he spent his career teaching English and feeding his polymathic imagination with late nights in the library. An early correspondent was Charles Olson – another modernist of Oppen's generation –

to whom he sent long, arcane bibliographies. “Prynne is so – he’s knowing”, Olson marvelled, “knowing like mad.”

Prynne’s overwhelmingly generous erudition defines the dynamic of his correspondence with Oliver, which begins in 1967 with the latter tentatively introducing himself as a journalist from the *Cambridge Evening News* and enclosing poems for “frank criticism”. The next two letters, both from Prynne, comprise photocopies of Renaissance anatomical drawings and a reading list on body perception: “probably unuseful”, he comments, “you might shred it in your soup”.

Thus, as Prynne began to make his reputation with his early masterpiece *The White Stones* (1969), Oliver was welcomed into his inner circle and its tone of high inquiry salted with jocularity. (Not coincidentally, the Cambridge of this time also produced Monty Python’s song about boozy philosophers). To anyone who has admired the Romantically ambitious verse that resulted, the recent volume of letters edited by Joe Luna – and produced to the usual fine standards of its publisher, The Last Books – could hardly be more absorbing and valuable.

Epistolary prose, for Prynne, has always been a critical mode. Although private news distantly impinges on the contents of his letters, he has self-consciously used them as T. S. Eliot used the essay: to work through his thinking about poetry, philosophy and politics before an audience. We may reasonably assume that these letters were always intended to be read by others – as Luna notes in his introduction, Prynne kept copies and recently deposited them in Cambridge University Library.

Oliver lived a more freelance life, less methodical but also less hermetic. What he valued in the early Prynne of *Kitchen Poems* (1968), he told the readers of the *Cambridge Evening News*, was “honesty in a poetry that can take politics and economics into its strands” – a poetry, that is, of left-wing critique, which

attempted to build among the ruins that Ezra Pound's fascism had made of such a project on the right.

Their friendship over the next three decades negotiated the tension between art and activism, as Oliver's growing commitment to an ethos of poetic testimony ran counter to Prynne's grammatically fragmented banishment of the lyric "I". In the 1990s Oliver worried about how to recover "a direct urgency of speech" that was also politically alert to privilege, and responded to Malcolm X's call in 1964 for white allies to criticize whiteness with *A Salvo for Africa* (2000), which "risks prose, a walking measure" to speak of European colonialism. (It appeared just before he died at the age of sixty-two.) Prynne, meanwhile, says of his sequence *Word Order* (1989): "I have written as directly about physical torture as I know how" – that is, by dark implication ("holding back the parts / of the soul by black thuds").

Denise Riley, a rare female poet to pass through the world of Cambridge poetry at this time, has written of "men ... lulled by music to dreaming their sonic enchantment is virtuously militant". (Women feature fleetingly here either as personal news or the curious ethical category of "womanliness".) Luna frankly acknowledges the "generic entitlement" of his double act, while making clear his devotion to both Prynne and Oliver, not least with his necessary, illuminating notes. And what is heartening about the whole volume is how warmly and eloquently each correspondent contests the virtues of the other's position. They are determined to find common moral and artistic ground.

Prynne, however, remains the cagier of the two, rarely discussing his poetry explicitly, preferring to drop hints during moments of broader reflection. Proposing the prosodic phenomenon of "retrospective" stress, he scrutinizes the first stanza of Thomas Wyatt's "So unwarely was never no man caught", concluding that "the contradictory overlap" of meaningful emphasis represents an experience that "cannot altogether coherently be said". This type of ambiguity, which sparks "the flare of a mind-act", has long been

Prynne's own ideal: notice how, in the lines quoted from *Into the Day*, the climactic resonance is retrospectively heard if the reader chooses to reverse-stress "also" to rhyme with "go". The effect is to echo the uncertain equilibrium of the central image ("the ship steadies / and the bird also"), the moment of hesitant rest between "delirium" and "frenzy". Readers looking for an introduction to Prynnean dialectics as a mode of literary criticism might begin with *Whitman and Truth* (2022), an exemplary set of student "reading notes" that leads the seminar room into darkness as it dismantles the apparent eye-witness testimony of a poem about a Civil War hospital from *Drum-Taps* (1865). Prynne ends by quoting Michael Riffaterre's claim that "fictional truth" is "poetic" and remarking drily: "There is no Glossary definition for 'poetic'".

Prynne's prolific recent poetry – more than two dozen small-press pamphlets since 2020 – also continues to contest the definition of itself. The ugly duckling of the brood, *Snooty Tipoffs* (2021), is a sumptuously printed, 300-page wedge of zany nonsense rhymes. Even to a reader used to Prynne's ironic refusals of lyric decorum, these throwaway improvisations can feel like a rummage in a box of plastic cutlery: "My breakfast lies over the necklace / These weevils are evil to see". As always, there is subtlety and eloquence to discover too ("dip flow in running current / Where fluted plumes fold slow and elegant"). But an alternative title might have been *Curate's Eggs*.

What would Oliver, an excellent critic of Prynne's work, make of it? He increasingly believed that poets should "vulgarise [themselves] and join in the chorus more fully", comparing his own late style with Philip Guston's turn from abstract expressionism to the cartoonishly figurative. In the almost offensively facetious vulgarity of *Snooty Tipoffs*, Prynne perhaps offers a knowing reply to his late friend.

Nothing in Prynne is purely ironic, however. As he writes to Oliver in 1987: "there is still a shimmer about the durable latency of the common rhymes ... as if providence itself resided within these hazards of phonetic accident". The

context of this remark is a despoiled Thatcherite landscape of "yuppies and agribrokers", and Prynne's forays into pastoral have always been streaked by awareness of environmental damage. But the idea of a durable, natural "providence" has returned in his recent, rhyme-led verse as a kind of rewilding. His diction once stood at a severe distance from that of Heaney-esque nature poetry; now the "vulgar" names of flora and fauna concatenate in staccato patterns across tongue-twisting parataxis, like the roll call of a cacophonous ark. To quote *At Raucous Purposeful* (2022): "Such watch nuthatch, acrobatic darting head-down fawn stitchwort. / Patchwork".

Prynne's vision of the world is, he tells Oliver, "a patchwork of truths": "when Pound lamented that the reality of Paradise was *spezzato* (or "jagged" ...), his mistake was in the lament, not in the recognition". Hence Prynne's addiction to three-word titles that point in all directions, like fingerposts. Is *Not Ice Novice* (2022) a meditation on old age ("no man may be wise before / He's lived his share of winters in the world", advises the Old English elegy "The Wanderer" (trans. Richard Hamer)) or the ice-free future of climate change? Each delicately off-key, singsong page sets four quatrains in a square, their meanings circling: mid-sequence the corn crake (in decline since the mechanization of farming) appears opposite Babbage's "difference engine" or proto-computer. This ominous juxtaposition ramifies into the memorably cracked later line "Penguin engine splinter". The anthropocene itself becomes a patchwork of words stitched together by "common rhyme", as the trappings of capitalism morph from cowrie trades to Amazon vans:

> She sells sea shells
> on shore before in time
> mortal shuttle at swells
> ridden even to prime.

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