

mains that some questions will eventually beget answers, some nullifications affirmations. Connolly holds hard to the hope that any day now we will find clarity in “that sweet scent under the leaves and shit.” The distillation would intoxicate Connolly, but he shall not let it.

Joshua Baldwin

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J.H. Prynne, *To Pollen*. London: Barque, 2006. 26pp. \$8

The following is the second chapter of an unfolding critical novella on current British poetry, to be entitled Corroded by Symbolisme: An Anti-Review of Twelve British Poets, Being Also a True Account of Dark and Mysterious Events Surrounding a Famous Poem Supposedly Written by Frank O’Hara. The next two chapters will be released in subsequent issues of this magazine.

The reader of the previous section of this serial review (see CR 53:1) will recall that in 2004 I had the pleasure to spend a pleasurable afternoon in Cambridge, England, chatting with J.H. Prynne’s former student, the poet-critic Andrew Duncan, concerning some fabulous texts from his (then yet unpublished) bookum, *Savage Survivals: amid modern suavity*.

And so it was in 2005 that I returned to Cambridge, this time to speak on a panel concerning translation, its truths, fictions, and myths. I was with Kevin Nolan and the great poets Nicomedes Suarez-Arauz of Bolivia and Franz Josef Czernin of Austria. We were talking about forgery and fable in poetry, having tea and scones at a delightful little shop by the Cam, near the old brydge in St. John’s. As luck would have it, Keston Sutherland and Peter Riley walked in, accompanied by the legendary avant-garde poet and Cambridge don, J.H. Prynne.

Oh, Jeremy, exclaimed Kevin, I thought you were in China!

No, no, I leave tomorrow, said Jeremy. I’m back here on Thursday, then I return to Beijing on Saturday. Then I’m back here on Wednesday, and then I’m in Shanghai on the following Sunday. Then I’m back here on Friday for examinations, then Hong Kong five days following. This whole Great Leap Forward thing is really getting quite exhausting.

This made everyone laugh merrily, and small talk ensued. By and by, Prynne and I settled into chit-chat about our Marxist-Leninist backgrounds, and we seemed to hit it offum, as we say in the US, even though he had been a Maoist and I had been a Trotskyistye. Around 11 AM I said I was going to head on back to Trinity to meet Astrid Lampe and Forrest Gander and Tom Raworth for lunch, and J.H. Prynne said, Well let me accompany you back, to which I said, Sure, thank you very much, and so he did, leaving Keston

and Peter arguing something rather vehemently with Kevin and Nicomedes, while Franz Josef sipped his tea, taking it all in with a bemused grin.

Well, back again in Freeport, Illinois now, and as chance would choose, in the packet of bookums that had come in the mail was also Prynne's latest, a short bookum of one serial poem titled *To Pollen*, published by Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland's superb Barque Press. So I set down Andrew Duncan's bookum and began to leaf through the elegant twenty-six pages of this pamphletum. I was immediately bemused by it, for it's really quite opaqueme, the pieces composed of radically asyndetic phrasings, totally devoid of normative syntax, a kind of sprung rhythm where conjunctions, coordinating and subordinating, have been as if liposuctioned from the text, the whole devoid of any other kind of logical linguistick sequence or quasi-figural representation that might please your average worker at the punch pressum.

As Prynne says in one of the epigraphs to the book, a quote from *The Pages of Day and Night*, "Sometimes the field sprouts nails / so much does the field long for water." In fact, yes, and if the poems seem something like a field of nails hammered upward from below—some of these nails breaking through the resistant surface, others not—so that the fractional graph, as it were, rendered by the glistening lexemic points, shadow-hints at the vast and unmapped semantic topography below, well, I can't say the effect surprised or surprises me, for, you see, I knew a bit about this little bookum also before it came, by coincidence, into my hands, and thus perhaps there was already a predisposition on my part to feel a resistance to its insistent obduracy. Let me see if I can further explaine.

Prynne and I left the scone and tea shop at St. John's and went upward in direction of King's, where I had my rooms for the week. Our talk turned to his recent poetry, with a focus on *For the Monogram* and *Bands around the Throat*, and because our talkynge had become interesting to us, we walked right past Trinity, and when we got to Pembroke, Jeremy said, Let's go in, I'll show you Edmund Spenser's portrait and the rooms of Chris Smart. We visited these, all the while talking pleasantly, and came then to sit on a bench in the second courtyard, along the April-blossomed path, really a gorgeous settynge. I noticed the curious happenstance that Prynne wore a large, whyte opal ring, exactly like the one Kevin Nolan did... I will try to remember now some of the things that were said in this (for the most part) amiable hour or so we spent together

I suggested to Prynne that his recent work reminded me a bit of late Zukofsky, "A"-22 and 23 and *80 Flowers*, and such. Well, of course not that the language is so thoroughly distilled, in your case, grammatically speak-

ing, I said. But there does seem to be a move toward a kind of depurated, fractal rigor, like in Chinese prosody, actually, where one has a complex grid of semantic couplings, aural interlockings, intertextual allusions, and so forth, and the reader moves around and wanders, guided not so much by syntagmatic sequence as by attention to the multiplicity of non-linear textuures that the excisions of normative grammar afforde. The controlling code gets smashed, information flows go a bit crazy, discursive frames bleed each into each and out beyond what we would have them mean when within the mirage of our controle. I mean in your recent work it's as if what you wish to show, againe and againe, is two major things, and they seem to me perhaps somewhat contradictory, really: A) Language is a huge weather system of variegated pattern and effect, autonomous and self-reproducing beyond the conscious intentions of authore or reader, and B) that it is the responsibility of the poet to nail this overwhelming motherfuckere down, to get a handle on the ideological hail and fog and numbing cold and deadening heat we walk within and breathe; I mean, you seem to want to expose the imbricated otherness of these weathers through a sampling and splicing at phrasal dimensions of discursive micro-climates and to do so as a means of analytic counter-discourse to the simulacral phantasms of the cultural surround—a kind of displaye, as the Language poets used to say, of “a mind in control of its language.” You know, a very Adornean attitude, modernist formalism as cultural resistance and all that... But can you see how there is a more interesting paradox here, and I wonder if it's a kind of paradox at the heart of the avant-garde—one your heroes Olson, Dorn, and O'Hara really didn't have to confront so immediately, but which you do, sitting as you are at the manifest limit in this garden? Well, that's maybe too preciously clever, “manifest limit in this garden,” but looke, these avant-garde formalist/analytic gestures are getting openly, eroticallye, I would say, sucked right into the archive and shackled away in the Museum at ever increasing rates of speede. On a somewhat more banal level, my problem with this asyndetic cut-up stuffum is that it's all, after about twenty-odd years, a pretty old and exhausted porne star. And anyway, who besides academic poets with an avant chip on their shoulder is cruising this opaquem and rather unpleasant stuffum anyway?

I stopped myself suddenly, realizing that I had gotten carried away, gone on for way too long, and likely insulted, beyond any possible redemptyon, the (and I say this sincerelie) great poet, J.H. Prynne. I looked over at him, nervouslie.

Mr. Prynne? Uh, Mr. Prynne? His eyes were closed and his mouthum a little bit open, as his chinum rested upon his chestum. *He was asleep!* I nudged him and he startled.

O! Yes, yes, Bei Dao, I'm back on my camel, old chap... Water, wat...

uh, Oh, my, I seem... to have fallen fast asleep... All this bloody flying back and forth to China! Oh, I'm dreadfully sorry.

That's OK, I said, No probleme.

He yawned. Yes, well, you had asked if I would read you a passage from my new book *To Pollen*, and so let me do that before we say goodbye. This, in fact, is the last movement of the sequence.... And this is what he read, and he did so very energetically for someone who had just awoken—in fact, it was incredibly rapid and percussive, like hammering something upward from below, at a great velocity. Blossoms were lightly falling from the many trees:

From a front seat it is bearable to suck a knife
blade to scrim in broth. Perfect on truth for steel
vernier axil you could easily cut this. It would be
ancestral brood-genitive in knowledge laid out be-
low your look to be alike, all the same blind enter
concisely a claim card membership. For blood, brown
in mouth firment, taste of metal run along clamant.
Fortunate aside leading tone will open our lips to
pout worn in tangible overglide. Hammer each one,
break note climb neck and neck. Knife luster facing
the music get the whole thing in your pocket, keep it
open. Diminish the haft affix loosely proponent span
blood group indexical self-cut. Try doing it now.

It seemed to me, actually, in an ironic sort of way, that the last sentence (and incidentally, I've always wondered if transformational grammare considers imperatives in Englishe as special cases of the *Pro-drop parametere*), self-conscious, even melodramatic, in its closure as it is, particularly in context of the bookum's fractured totalitie, bore a frightening resemblance to the last line in William Stafford's "Traveling through the Dark," but I didn't say so, of course. Cock-robin hopped happy about; Peter-rabbit munched contentedly on a fern; students and dons began to populate the gardens, emergent from classe in the dying Sunne. I saw some sweat pouring from Prynne's sideburnians.

By the way, Mr. Prynne, I said, in leave-taking, I know the work of Frank O'Hara has been very important to you, and do you know that a friend of mine has recently written an essaye that strongly suggests, nearly proves, I dare say, that "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" was not actually wrytten by O'Hara? (*Nota bene*: This essay, by Tosa Motokiyu, Okura Kyojin, and Ojiu Norinaga, is to appear in fall of 2007, in the inaugural issue of *Almost Island*, an online magazine out of New Delhi.) Prynne swung his face toward me with suddenness and glared at me with a great ferositie. He was very awayke now. His lips began to tremble and he began to bat his eyes rapidlie.

Who... Who told you this?! I mean... Where did you hear such a ridiculous thing? he almost shouted.

I was startled by the nature of his reactyone.

Well, I said, it's just an essaye with a hypothesynge that is surprisyng, but I do think it is very original and very interestynge... In fact, it is based on new information recovered from sources close to O'Hara and who were in contact with his manuscripts during the time shortly after his deathe.

Really... [cough] Really now... And tell me, who is the author of this so-called essay? he said again, in a kind of hiss. And who are these people you say provided this information?

By this time I could see there was somethynge going on... I'm sorry, Mr. Prynne, I said, But I cannot saye at this poynte. But perhaps I could send you an advance copy of the text onlye?

Yes, yes, I would like to please see this immediately, he said. May I call you or may we write about this over email? It is of the most utter importance that we communicate on this, Dr. Johnson... And that I see this with the utmost dispatch.

It is? I said. But why?

Just trust me, please, Sir. There are issues involved here... Well, it is simply very important. Would you, please, have an email address or an office number back in the States where I could reach you?

His white opal ring did gleam in the sunne. I provided my offyce number, informyng hime that my modeste communitye college did not yet have email.

And with that we somewhat awkwardly parted at Pembroke's ancynent front gate. Many things were to transpire after this, and some of them of a nature I cannot yet reveal in full detayle. Let it just be said for now that I received numerous phone calls over the next few months, some of them from Prynne, who was always quite proper, if sometimes rather earnest in his urgings that I convince my friend to desist from publication of any article about O'Hara's famous poem; others from unidentified callers (transcripts of which I will share when this novellum is compleat), who left low-voiced messages that were, to put it generously, barelie veiled threats to my future career chances as a teacher of Literature and Creative Wrytynge at any half-prestigious four-year research Universitie. Don't think for a moment we can't blacklist you to the fucking grave, asshole, said one particularlye disturbing callere.

But let's move on: Back in Freeport again, and after reading through *To Pollen*, I wrote Prynne, wishing for his comment. I wrote, in my chosen font size:

Dear Mr. Prynne,

Kent Johnson here. Thanks for your last phone message of a couple weeks back. There was a lot of static on it, and I didn't catch the number you left. Perhaps you were calling from China. As I'd told you, however, this whole matter concerning O'Hara has really gotten to be quite strange and uncomfortable. I certainly don't mind your calls, not in the least, but please understand that I have no control at all over the impending publication of the O'Hara tape-essay, so your appeals in that regard are of no use. And please, as I've asked, if you know any of the other people who seem similarly anxious about this matter, would you kindly ask them to stop calling me. Some of the messages left by these people, most with English accents, have been more than a bit improper. I'm sure you can understand my concern about all this, especially in wake of the mugging I suffered in Hampstead at the Keats museum shortly after we met at Cambridge.

Be that as it may, I hope we can put all this aside for the time being: You see, I am reviewing your new book of poetry (To Pollen) for an upcoming issue of Chicago Review, and I am going to do it a bit differently than your standard review, I think. We'll see what happens.

Would you be so kind to comment on To Pollen, its method and ideational drive? I'm trying to think of this new book of yours in context of the work emerging in the Language project from around the late 70s up until the beginning of its general academic sequestering circa the first Gulf War, early 90s. That is, one branch of Langpo's poetry can be seen as based in a generative grammar, with a tendency toward purposeful violations of selectional restrictions of syntactic elements at clausal levels—what I would call its "synthetic" wing (Palmer, Silliman, Hejinian, Armantrout, Watten, Perelman, etc.) and which preserves grammatical and rhetorical orders that allow for quasi-lyrical stagings, permitting it to keep a foot in the institutional door, as it were—a door that is now pretty much wide open; the other branch, which I would call its "analytic" wing, is based on ungrammatical remixing of speech part elements, a more radical linguistic fracturing that funnels energy to lexical and phrasal combinations that in effect block passage into any kind of scenic, recognizably lyric projection (Coolidge, much of Retallick, much of Raworth, McCaffery, P. Inman, etc.). I would see To Pollen and much of your late work as falling within this latter mode—a mode that is more resistant to readerly "enjoyment," for lack of a better word, and thus less adaptable, seemingly, to institutional accommodation at the level of cultural marketing, exchange, and so forth, but which in fact still, I'd argue, leaves itself open to recuperation into the Institution Art, to call upon a useful phrase from Peter Bürger.

In both cases, that is, it is linguistic torsion that guides composition—the poetic "difference" of both modes can be explained—indeed, asks to be jointly explained—in terms of a grammatical self-reflexivity. The limits of the poem's world are exalted, so to speak, as the self-conscious limits of its grammar—limits the reader is asked to engage, of course, as "co-producer of the text," and all that. Now, the "political" impulses of such writing are well-rehearsed, and I believe you have done a bit of that yourself. But is it enough? Is it possible avant poetry has begun to hit its head against an increasingly comfortable and welcoming wall? I wonder what you would think if I said that to be revolutionary now, if there is that hope (remember our hope?), poetry will require a movement out of composition restricted to grammatical experiment and open into a broader conception of the syntactic—one where poetry more daringly takes stock of its status as marginal branch in the Culture's Total Syntax—a marginalization due to Poets so obediently accepting Authorship as the Noun Phrase of the Literary sentence's structure, if you'll forgive the quasi-Spicerian pun. My point is that there is grammar and there is Grammar. The latter is the forest that can't be seen for the trees of the former. Thus the crisis beginning circa early 90s that I referred to earlier, and which accumulates, now, at ever greater velocities. (In responding, would you please do so in size #8 font, as I happen to favor [it is an idiosyncrasy] email in such miniaturesque setting.)

Well, I waited for a couple weeks and no response came, and just as I was about to give up and scratch *To Pollen* from this review, imagine my surprise (though with accompanying disappointment at the font) to receive in reply the below.

Dear Dr. Johnson,

I'm pleased that your school now has email. I am interested in your points to some extent. But nonetheless the reader has to maintain a particular alertness to make out, within the ironical and self-parodic interplay of tones, the difference between the right and the righteous, the pain of loss and the power of pain. Your solicitation for a poetry that would be anticipatory and retrospective of ideological fear is so constant that the reader could hardly discover within the sensorium where actual pain begins and does or does not end. That is the classical difficulty for a rhetoricalised instrument: its readiness to claim the privilege of an autonomous occasion which covertly it exploits. How can you give, unless you are to present merely symptomatic malnutrition, what you claim to have taken away—the wheat from beneath the iron.

Could you tell me please, now, who the person is who is writing the essay you told me about when we were together in Cambridge?

I pondered this for a while, feeling a sense of déjà vu each time I read it. And then it dawned on me: Why, this is almost a word for word copy of a passage from Prynne's famous "Letter to Andrew Duncan"! What a small world the world of poetry is... And so I wrote Prynne back, and I said (paraphrasing something written by Andrew Duncan):

Dear Mr. Prynne,

Thank you for this response, whose source I recognize and whose rhetorical register of address I sense is very close in spirit to that of the Sun while he talks to Frank O'Hara, so in that sense I guess you are sending me a message of some kind. But I do puzzle over its ending and the allusion to Wheat and Iron: By Wheat do you allude to 'Wheat of song'—a translation of Gwenith Gwawd, the literary name of the mediaeval Welsh poet? And would this be in opposition to "threads of Iron," a phrase in that book about "the history of what is taken away"? If I'm seeing your point, I think the key to this concluding passage is the opposition between alienation and a benign, socially harmonious, existence. If you never show the latter (anywhere in history), you lose contrast. There is no basis for saying that any state of society is bad. Any structure becomes flattened. OK, great, but China is not what it used to be, or what some Western Marxists hoped it might become, when you originally wrote this; and, too, can you see how some would regard the kind of hyper-modernist poetry you are now writing as nothing but ironically exemplary of the very admonition contained in what you wrote to Andrew Duncan back when? For your late poetry, like that of current post-avant formalism, is nothing if not (if you'll forgive me) a solicitation of an anticipatory and retrospective fear that is so constant that the reader can hardly discover within the sensorium where actual pain begins and does or does not end. And that is the classical difficulty for a rhetoricalised post-avant instrument: its readiness to claim the privilege of an autonomous occasion which covertly it exploits.

You should talk to your wayward former student Andrew Duncan now about his turn to wild myth creation, Mr. Prynne. The collapse of the theology of Marxism-Leninism (particularly since the First Gulf War) has left the old left experimental wing with nothing but grammar, syntax, and a flat page to play with and upon. The poems either try to sound kind of abstract lyrical, or they try to sound like they are short-wave radio operators channelling different frequencies, squawks and squeals and all. Maybe the time has come to leave, as Mr. Duncan—at least in proto—has, the obvious stage behind and build about into imagined dimensions of different kinds. Paratext, paradoxically, is boundless, like space. Who knows where it might lead?

Still, and seriously, I'd like to know, if you can tell me, what is the Wheat and what is the Iron?

Well, I sent this message, and the next day I founde in my in-box the following automated reply:

I am currently travelling and lecturing in China and won't be reading email until after the New Year (Gregorian Calendar). I will do my best to respond to you at that time.

I never did hear from hime againe...

Next up, Chapter 3: An intensely heady meeting over pints with Tim Atkins, as the strangeness surrounding the matter of O'Hara's poem reaches frankly disturbing levels.

Kent Johnson

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