

first clause, which presents as generally assumed something that few would agree upon even now. Even at the height of her popularity, Smith was often dismissed as a “minor poet,” and it now seems unlikely she will ever be as well regarded as (say) her contemporary, Philip Larkin. Yet perhaps that marginal position need not be considered a snub. Her poems get much of their strength from appearing slighter than they are; from seeming not to fit in a particular school, movement, or period; from appearing to exist outside the literary tradition even as they are deeply in conversation with it. In her life, Smith placed much value in independence, even when standing apart came at the price of loneliness. Her poems express a similar commitment. By repeatedly evading our assumptions, they challenge and expand our sense of what serious poetry can do, what shape it can take.

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J. H. Prynne, *The White Stones*. Introduction by Peter Gizzi. New York: New York Review Books, 2016. 152 pp. \$14

J. H. Prynne’s *The White Stones* was originally published in 1969 by Tim Longville and John Riley’s Grosseteste Press. Its covers were dark green with a cairn of white dots framed by a black rectangle on the front. It collected fifty-eight poems published between November 1965 and August 1968, mostly in the subscriber-only magazine *The English Intelligencer*, but also in Andrew Crozier and Tom Clark’s *The Wivenhoe Park Review*. It followed the acerbic and politically focused *Kitchen Poems*, which Cape Goliard had put out the year before.

Now republished as a pocket edition in the New York Review Books Poets series and introduced by Peter Gizzi, *The White Stones* has been promised to the American reader as “the ideal introduction to the achievement and vision of a legendary but in America still little-known contemporary master.” The anonymous puff on the rear cover is unnerving, not least because the word “master,” though here perhaps intended as a compliment, perpetuates Prynne’s status as an obscure don from the old Oxbridge world, whose poems are constructed to preemptively subordinate the servants. (That’s us.) Prynne’s reception as a hermetic poet withholding the answers to our questions has done as much to intimidate readers as it has to seduce them. *The Guardian*’s besotted John Mullan, for example, wrote: “Prynne’s prophets have gone forth from Cambridge to whisper the word to the qualified few.”

Yet *The White Stones* really is the ideal introduction: it collects the majority of poetry written during Prynne’s most “lyrical” period, it generally

abides by conventions of English word order, its stanzaic structure is orderly, its lines somewhat uniform. The NYRB edition adds a couple of texts to the collection: *Day Light Songs* (1968), eleven short, visually aerated poems about the sublime imbrication of thought, body, and natural movement; and “A Note on Metal,” a highly condensed account of the metaphysical and anthropological history of metal and money. What we can now easily hold in a single hand chronicles Prynne’s emergence at a time when the reception of New American Poetry in England (especially the Black Mountain wing) had been taking hold for over a decade. Prynne’s very first collection, *Force of Circumstance and Other Poems* (1962), was suppressed by the poet from his collected poems, and as early as 1962, Prynne was lamenting the prospect of its publication to his recent correspondents across the Atlantic, including Charles Olson.

*The White Stones* is therefore Prynne’s second attempt at a “first” book, and its languid, philosophical style binds the reflexive joy about his newfound lyric powers to an exploration of the limits of Black Mountain’s poetics of proprioception and geography. And like Olson’s poems, not to mention those of Pound and Eliot lurking behind all of this, the poems are dappled with marked and unmarked citations from the past and scholarship about the past: archaeology, geochronology, medieval European travelogues of Mongolia, moments from the English lyric tradition from Henry Vaughan to William Wordsworth and John Clare, the rites of Siberian shamans, among numerous others. The poems radiate a certain display of *knowledge*, and this is consistent with Prynne’s early commitment to poetry’s capacity to give us what he described in 1961 as “the most powerful and sustaining sense of the world, in all its complex variousness.” In general, *The White Stones* is a happy set of mostly first-person lyrics, enhanced by a tangible enthusiasm for his transatlantic friendships with Olson and Ed Dorn, a consummate fascination with etymological derivation, and occasionally a diffuse, elegiac mode free of nostalgia. It is concerned with the mellifluous conceptualization of the body of the poet as a *form* within the English landscape. It demonstrates what Gizzi, in his introduction, calls a “quality of mind,” probing the interface of attention and being so important to Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, both of whom Prynne read voraciously during this period.

In the early poems within the collection, those published in late 1965 and throughout 1966, there is a concern with the limits of being—of what we can aspire to, of what we can know—and with the articulation of feeling in regard to those limits. There is a careful, stoic modesty about one’s desire; there is a stringency, an asceticism and endurance for events as they come and go:

All the rage of the heart reaches this lifted  
point, then: a fashion of spirit, a made thing.  
For this there is no name but the event,  
    of its leaving. There is no  
    lattice, we don't sit by  
    the traffic lights bathing  
the soul in the links of time. ("How It's Done")

Here passion reifies the spirit, which as soon as it becomes a thing, continues on as quickly as it came. There is no temporal appointment made with spirit that would deliver us out of the material. Elsewhere, in "The Holy City," Prynne wants to recover a sense of the divine as the daily: "there's no mystic moment involved"—no occult ecstasy that enables the divine—and "Jerusalem" can be felt simply by walking across the grass. Indeed, in his long poem "Aristeas, In Seven Years," Prynne refers to an article in which the philologist G. S. Hopkins argues for an etymological genealogy of the *divine* rooted in the word *day*.

This articulation of the diurnal and spirit is closely related to Prynne's interest in shamanism, one that also seeks to shed light on the conceptual and material limits of what would much later be nominated England or Europe or the West. His research during this period swings between the Orphic concept of the poet as an instrument of the world and a geography that views the "history of person / as an entire condition of landscape" ("First Notes on Daylight"). Prynne's condensed epic, "Aristeas," originally published in a pamphlet edition by Crozier's Ferry Press in 1968, adopts a third-person vantage, which comfortably deflects the confusion of the author and shamanistic practice. The longest poem in *The White Stones*, it is the culmination of those correlations between spirit, myth, and matter that drive his poetry of this period. Passing through seven numbered sections, Prynne articulates the myth of Aristeas of Proconnesus, who in several accounts disappeared for seven years and later spontaneously returned. With poetic speculation driven in part by the attention Mircea Eliade and E. R. Dodds paid to this semi-legendary figure, Prynne fills in the historical blanks through a double-lens overlaying the Herodotean history of non-Greek peoples with the anthropology of various shamanic rituals in Siberia. This project, like that other poem with a list of references, "The Glacial Question, Unsolved," demonstrates a level of scholarly detail that would be rarely displayed so prominently in future work.

Indeed, *The White Stones*, for all its splendor and status, is actually *unlike* any other book in Prynne's now six-decade career, which spans over forty collections. Already at the very end of the 1960s, Prynne is writing poems

that are spasmodic, ill-tempered, and pathological when compared to the slow-motion undulations of the majority of poems found in *The White Stones*. Toward the end of this collection, the poetic valence begins to disintegrate. The love felt by the embodied lyric interlocutor is no longer “the world” itself, as proclaimed at the end of “Song in Sight of the World.” In a later poem, simply titled “Love,” these are the final rhyming lines: “Cry as you / will, take what you / need, the night is young / and limitless our greed.” In “Moon Poem” Prynne proposes a “community of wish” that is later mocked in “Questions for the Time Being”:

Yet living in hope is so silly when our desires  
are so separate, not part of any mode or con-  
dition except language & there they rest on  
the false mantelpiece, like ornaments of style.

Language is no refuge. Poets are no more capable of resisting revolutionary and counter-revolutionary upheaval than those without “ornaments of style” collected for the private chamber’s mantelpiece.

*The White Stones* eventually begins to slip into the space of *Kitchen Poems* (1968), where Prynne’s double interest in biopolitical power and the movement of capital had begun to take form. In “Moon Poem” Prynne could write that “we *are* more pliant than the mercantile notion of choice will determine.” But later, in “Crown,” the trope has changed: “Each face” appears as “an absent coin.” So while *The White Stones* is an “ideal introduction,” it’s an introduction to a place that Prynne would quickly leave.

It is precisely not the work of the middle to late 1960s but rather the poems in and after *Brass* (1971) that capture Prynne’s signature style, should there be such a thing. In the early 1960s there was a deliberate distancing of his poetics from the post-WWII British Movement poets. It would evolve into a critique of precisely those cozy ironies by which the author could extract readerly amusement, and of the ontological levity by which he could seem to abdicate responsibility for *being English* and for now (after centuries of colonization and capitalization of natural resources) being under the thumb of American foreign policy. Throughout Prynne’s career, it is the malevolence of the European desire for accumulation that is always at stake.

Yet it is and has always been very difficult to say what he does or does not believe: his poems *perform* the fact that moral intelligence is always self-deceptive. English language competence is transfigured, and subjectivity decentralized. Indeed, as we can see in the relative uniqueness of *The White Stones* within his oeuvre, Prynne sought to create poetic textures that minimize the function of propositional statement. Poetic transformations always appear

to be deranged when thought against the normative, but the quality of the normative is always under interrogation in Prynne's writing. In a moment of lucid irony, perhaps all the more disingenuous for being so clear, the third thesis of "Questions for the Time Being" reflects suspiciously on the kind of lyric posture so prominent in *The White Stones*:

3. What goes on in a  
language is the corporate & prolonged action  
of worked self-transcendence—other minor verbal  
delays have their uses but the scheme of such  
motives is at best ambiguous; [.]

The process of self-transcendence is always an adventure into uncertain territory, whether it's the legendary realm beyond the written record and reconstructed by carbon dating or about the socialization and ideologization of the subject by language. The final lines of Prynne's essay "A Note on Metal" register a certain caution about certainty itself, about the imposition of scientific explanation on the terra incognita of the past: "If we are confident over the more developed consequences, at the unrecognised turn we are still at a loss to say where or why." The aura of uncertainty is bolstered by a stoic calm in *The White Stones*, a moral fabric that would quickly become untenable in the years to come, beginning with *Brass* in the seventies and continuing into *Kazoo Dreamboats* (2011), Prynne's speculative pilgrimage through the *physis* of dialectical materialism.

I cannot agree with Gizzi when he writes in his introduction that the "utopian energy" of *The White Stones* will "never become a nostalgic object." The world of *The White Stones* inevitably summons a place for nostalgia to occur, even if "home" is not a nation or a territory but rather a passionate belief in the *ordo amoris* or a recognition of the divinity of the present. As soon as I hit the phrase "Steroid metaphrast" in the poem "L'Extase de M. Poher" from *Brass*, I can no longer believe that "the unceasing image of hope / is our place in the world." Indeed, this repackaging of Prynne's most unusual collection is itself imbued with a desire for a lyric presence that would quickly disappear from his work entirely.

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