THE WHOLE HOG:

A STUDY OF *KAZOO DREAMBOATS* BY J. H. PRYNNE

by

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I
WHAT IS IT?

Kazoo Dreamboats or, On What There Is by J. H. Prynne, was published in 2011.[1] It's an elusive work. Written in long prose lines, and structured in paragraphs, it looks like prose, and breathes like prose, but uses line breaks too. Not just for ease of reference then, but for a nice mimesis of equivocation, I'll refer to it as both 'the work' and 'the poem'. It seems to say that matter and consciousness share a single substance, intelligible in contradiction; but what the words actually do is make you aware of many things, all at the same time, continually merging and combining. In this section I'll try offer some answers to the questions – what is it? how do we read it? what should we make of it? – that arise from these conditions.

Perhaps it is best to begin with the 'feel' of the poem. There is immediately this light-and-dark effect. Sparks of lyric-type affect and imagery flare up and disappear back into penumbras of odd jargon. The poem lurches from this:

> I saw these gaps of explanation rolling like wheels contrary within
> themselves, alien motions on fire with coriolis demeanour. I saw
> the grains self-rotate in their own amazement with noise of spheres
> metallic and burnished (p. 651)

to this:

> By sonic socratic dub nett recusancy obversive deduct interval
> exfold, train up pitch departures, percuss the air punctual let

[1] The poem was initially published in Cambridge by Critical Documents, then included in the latest edition of Prynne's collected poetry: *Poems*, 3rd edn (Bloodaxe, 2015). All my references to *Kazoo Dreamboats* and Prynne's earlier poems are taken from this edition.

> addit pressure point, aqueous gearing will screen hyperbaric fully
> virtual it is separation (pp. 652-3).

In the first example, the rhythm is dilated and luminous. The cadencing is strong and connected, the syntax coheres and flows. A residual subjectivity is present, guiding and opening the sentences, conscious of its lyric pedigree. In the latter, a zombie pulsion lurches, uncadenced, through dense unconnected verbiage. In this unstable torrent of jargon no voice is audible. What is this switching between rhythms? We feel it keenly, but what *is* it?

What we feel, I think, is the contest between antithetical modes of utterance. And the feeling of this contest seems to be connected to the feeling of thought itself: of thought *as* a contest. In 2008 Prynne delivered a speech, titled 'Poetic Thought':

> To work with thought requires the poet to grasp at the strong and persistent ways in which understanding is put under test by imagination as a screen of poetic conscience, to coax and hurl at finesse and judgment, and to set beliefs and principles on line, self-determining but nothing for its own sake merely; all under test of how things are. Nothing taken for granted, nothing merely forced, pressure of the composing will as varied by delicacy, because these energies are dialectical and not extruded from personality or point of view. Dialectics in this sense is the working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality and the obduracy of thought; irony not as an optional tone of voice but as a marker for intrinsic anomaly.[2]

Dialectics, he seems to be saying, emerges in the energies released by testing and challenging understanding against the standard of 'how things are'. This connection is reinforced by the poem's alternative title-cum-subtitle: *'or, On What There Is'*. And 'how things are', or 'What There Is', seems to be related to the notion of contradiction, which, to our perplexity, inheres in the 'very substance of object-reality'; it is also encountered in 'the obduracy of thought'. This pairing of object-reality and thought – matter and mind – is a central feature and preoccupation of the poem. And this switching, this contest between rhythms, between antithetical speech-flows (though 'speech' is hardly the word), is perhaps our first image of, or encounter with,

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[2] J. H. Prynne, 'Poetic Thought', *Textual Practice*, 24:4, 595-606 (p. 597).

contradiction – which becomes the mode of encountering *things* and *thought* simultaneously. And this restless contest, letting nothing settle, is also, according to Prynne, a feature of conscience.

Commenting on Prynne's poetry specifically in the light of his essay, 'Poetic Thought, Reeve and Kerridge, in their new annotated edition of Prynne's 1983 volume, *The Oval Window*, describe this restlessness within Prynne's poetic texts, and its effect on the reader, with great insight:

Phrases and sentences break off unfinished, interrupted by others; in this way the vocabularies from different places, carrying their different assumptions, merge and appear in strange juxtapositions. Sometimes a poetic voice finds space for an extended lyrical flight, or the disparate elements bind together in passages of lyrical intensity in which the cadences continue while the sense and vocabulary shift. At other times, these vocabularies stand off from each other, with little to bridge the gaps of sense and syntax. The reading process, too, will involve passages of fluency and acceleration followed by dissolution and regrouping.[3]

In *Kazoo Dreamboats*, the movement between 'fluency and acceleration' on the one hand, and 'dissolution and regrouping' on the other, embody the working of conscience. And this conscience is poetic to the extent that the restless process of flowing and dissolving, of testing and doubting, prevents any one thought from crystallising, and instead keeps all thoughts flowing in actual time, like the substance of matter itself, so that the testing is occurring all the time:

> Contested equity starts here, without contest equity
> would fail (p. 654)

Kazoo Dreamboats seems to marshals its urgency towards a performance of this duty. Zigzagging between so many heterogeneous rhythms, in fugitive trespass over so many tones and dictions, no single perspective can establish full security. The flow is overriding, and the flux rules. And through the flicks and switches we feel the working of its conscience: multiple thoughts and affects in abrasive convergence on the present moment. As Justin Katko has written of an earlier volume of Prynne's, *Triodes*, 'individual language-units [...] generate

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[3] N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *J. H. Prynne, 'The Oval Window': A New Annotated Edition* (Bloodaxe, 2018), p. 12.

multiple parallel semantic chain reactions.' He goes on to compare the interchange of these reactions to 'the opening and closing of electrical circuits'.[4] So how do we *read* such circuits? How do we receive, then channel, their charge?

For all its peculiarity, the poem does provide some explicit pointers. In his essay mentioned above, Prynne asserts that 'poetic thought' involves deploying dialectical energies which have no personal source, whether in character or intellect: 'not extruded from personality or point of view.' Rather they engage a prior ontological condition: 'the working encounter with contradiction in the very substance of object-reality'. Prynne derives this notion from Mao and readily acknowledges the debt, inside and outside *Kazoo Dreamboats*. Embedded in the poem's cacophonous flux of language are eight lengthy quotations. These, formatted into discrete island-like paragraphs whose larger margins heighten their isolation from the surrounding verse-blocks, sit inside the main flow like windows through which we glimpse a more stable landscape of language and ideas. They exert poise and stillness. Here we encounter a relieving coherence; their calm and deliberateness attract our meaning-making instinct, which can briefly settle. The second quotation is Mao (one of two taken from him):

> There is internal contradiction in every single thing, hence its motion and development. Contradictoriness within a thing is the fundamental cause of its develop-ment, while its interrelation and interactions with other things are secondary causes ... It is evident that purely external causes can only give rise to mechanical motion, that is, to changes in scale or quantity, but cannot explain why one thing changes into another. As a matter of fact, even mechanical motion under external force occurs through the internal contradictoriness of things. Simple growth in plants and animals, their quantitative development, is likewise chiefly the result of internal contradictions (p. 642).

In his interview with the *Paris Review* in 2016, Prynne stresses the importance of the idea: 'the 1937 essay *On Contradiction* is one of [Mao's] major essays...He believes that dialectic is the

[4] Justin Katko, 'Sex – *Triodes* – Gilgamesh', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Joe Luna and Jow Lindsay Walton (= *Hix Eros*, 4 (2015)), pp. 43-60 (p. 44).

principle of relationship and activity within the material order itself, the actual order of nature, and not just within the intellectual order. It has meant a lot to me.'[5]

The quotations are long, so important. They offer themes, key ideas. But more significant is the way the poem assiduously seeks to draw, and develop, the links between its main ideas; and this linking seems to generate momentum towards a larger and larger horizon of meaning, which remains evasive but intuited. The ideas become part of our *perception* of meaning in the poem, as we read. Mao's is the second quotation; this is the first:

> In all matter there are continuous jostlings of positive and negative charges; at every point in a material body or in a vacuum, transient electric and magnetic fields arise spontaneously. These fluctuations in charge and in field occur not only because of thermal agitation but also because of inescapable quantum-mechanical uncertainties in the positions and momenta of particles and in the strengths of electromagnetic fields. The momentary positions and electric currents of moving charges act on, and react to, other charges and their fields (p. 641).

This comes from *Van der Waals Forces: A Handbook for Biologists, Chemists, Engineers and Physicists*, by Adrian Parsegian. As Gerald Bruns has explained, van der Waals forces are 'electromagnetic forces that play off of one another...instead of stabilizing into any sort of coherence. If we think of gravity as a strong force that brings things down to earth where we can take hold of them, van der Waals forces are weak, given, if anything, to turning things loose – picture molecules bouncing freely off one another...instead of coalescing into a structure.'[6]

Yet we hardly require any explanation. The suggestive phrases 'continuous jostlings', 'transient electric and magnetic fields', 'fluctuations in charge' have already done the work. When we read

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[5] Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin, 'J. H. Prynne: The Art of Poetry No. 101', *Paris Review*, 218 (2016), 174–207, (p. 188).

[6] Gerald Bruns, 'Dialectrics; or, Turmoil & Contradiction: A Reading of J. H. Prynne's *Kazoo Dreamboats*', *Chicago Review*, 57:3/4 (Winter 2013), 54–70 (p. 60).

'The momentary positions and electric currents of moving charges act on, and react to, other charges and their fields', we instinctively take such terms as a useful explication, describing what we can already feel happening in our reading of the poem. We don't need to be conversant with electromagnetic forces and particle physics to understand how Parsegian's *language* is already supplying images for what this jostling, fluctuating poem is doing: the quotation simply adumbrates in thematic outline a zone that the verse's activity has already filled in. In tune with its processes, we cannot help but draw resemblances and equivalences: first we see the 'jostlings of positive and negative charges' resembling phrases and jargons bouncing off each other, which in turn suggests an analogy between the poem and 'matter', with the language performing the being of things within the scientific order; then Mao's 'internal contradiction within every single thing' reinforces and develops these connections, adding a philosophical gloss on Parsegian's electromagnetic turmoil, which we now see applies not just to language and matter but to thought as well; and so on.

So when we come across a separately paragraphed quotation from Aristotle such as the following:

> For what is predicated of
> white will not be the same as what is predicated of the
> object which is white, and nothing except white will
> be separated from the object; since there is no other
> ground of separation except the fact that the white is
> different from the object in which the white exists (p.649).

we can apprehend how similar themes and ideas are being re-gathered and re-combined from a fresh perspective, even while specific words and phrases ('ground of separation') recall earlier phrases in the poem: 'The ground divided | by itself' (p. 639). When we read other quotations not isolated from the flow of the verse, but this time set within it (ie not in discrete paragraphs) the same process of blending new themes into one dynamic framework of connection is at work:

> Molecular contradiction given
> out for taken aback, 'each new distribution seems to contradict
> what preceded it; since there are no predictable continuities, one
> can only listen in the immediate present to each moment as it
> occurs' (p. 653).

This is part of a commentary by Michael Parsons on a recording of early piano music by Christian Wolff (set out by Prynne in the 'Reference cues' at the end of the poem (p. 662)). But it's not the commentary that matters; what matters is establishing music as a key motif within a shifting constellation of ideas while expanding it further. The poem emphasises a fresh connection – listening to music and molecular activity – by a kinship of image and key words ('Molecular contradiction given...taken aback', 'each new distribution seems to contradict what preceded it') while offering the quote as a crib on how to 'read' that connection, and the poem more generally. We know by now that 'there are no predictable continuities' in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, so the advice to 'listen in the immediate present to each moment as it occurs' is both a stabilising encouragement, and a description of what we have no choice but to do anyway.

These bonds and contrasts, between quotations, and between quotations and the surrounding verse, allow for a large range of ideas and themes – quantum mechanics, electromagnetism, language, philosophy, music, and numerous other concerns – to coalesce into a rich background of ever-fecund possibility. In their linkages, we come to understand each zone of idea and imagery as collaborative; each as enriched by all the others, and illustrative of the all others. The links criss-cross over intellectual domains, collapsing the distances between them, bringing all into propinquity; such promiscuous interrelation opens up enormous vistas onto the poem's potentiality for meanings. It is to this sense of ever-expanding and restlessly self-constituting scale that several critics have reacted when defining what they see as the poem's significance in Prynne's oeuvre. Describing it as 'a crucial twist-point in his work of the last two decades', Luke Roberts remarks that, 'The disturbance that *Kazoo Dreamboats* presents to the schedule of Prynne's writing can't be underestimated.'[7] Bruns comments that the poem, premising a 'universe in which contradiction is the only true universal', portrays 'a possible impossible world.' It challenges us to 'imagine a self deleting universe.'[8]

Prynne concurs in this assessment of the poem's oddness and discrepancy: '*Kazoo* was an unprecedented and unexpected kind of composition. I was very conscious that it was well out of line from anything I've tried to do before.' Indeed, he confesses that the effect of it baffles him:

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[7] Luke Roberts, 'By Law in Sound: J. H. Prynne's Recent Poetry', *Chicago Review* (2019), chicagoreview.org/by-law-in-sound-j-h-prynnes-recent-poetry, para. 2.

[8] Bruns, p. 62.

> When it was all done, and I came to read this work, as if produced from an alien planet, I would ask myself, Do I hold these views? Do I believe these opinions? Do they replace and permanently cancel the points of view which preceded them? Is the damage mortal and deliberate, and am I going to stand by the damage? Or is it just a phase I went through, just some wild extravagance, and do I then revert to being the kind of person that I was before? If so, with what alteration? These are very uncomfortable questions. And I have lived with them because I really was, and am, unable to answer them. In that sense it's the most disordering work I've ever composed, and it has left me in a great confusion of mind.[9]

Prynne's uncertainty acknowledges the peculiarity, the hardness-to-read, and the deep, restless ambiguity of his own poem. It is the consequence of the process he described in his essay on 'Poetic Thought': 'to coax and hurl at finesse and judgment, and to set beliefs and principles on line'. It is the consequence of the poem's contest of utterance, enacted in contradiction, which produces the rich indeterminism whereby the poem's central ideas, together with their opposites, are validated by the same energy as being potentially-the-case. Indeed it's the absolute charge of so much of the poem, its sheer dialectical force, that both baffles and compels. Let us consider an example:

> Or left to climb
> for short time disposed to client to transmit, agree counterparty already
> torn out attract waymark fondly accusing all objects of all thought
> paved with joy and stirred in a hefty basin. Right there assist by
> measurement bonded base-pairs idiotic grace-notes summed in trillions
> is that all enough to find out, travel the floor boarded over in
> displacement sets, uncertain at zero-point difference (p. 641).

I might have chosen this at random. There's no outstanding reason for lighting on this passage, which makes it apt for a generic demonstration of the poem's processes.

At first glance certain bare patterns are discernible. We can detect assonance, shading into rhyme ('left to climb...short time...client', 'paved...basin...base-pairs...grace-notes'). We can detect

[9] Dolven and Kotin, pp. 196-7.

iterations of a particular diction: 'disposed to client...agree counterparty' sound like instructions on a lawyer's memo, while 'measurement bonded base-pairs...summed in trillions...displacement sets...zero-point difference' belong together in some scientific calculus. Other fragments exert a thematic force: 'bonded base-pairs' brings molecules back into view, while 'grace-notes' reinforces the connection to music mentioned above, something which the assonance and matching rhythmic signature, 'base-pairs...grace-notes', have already suggested. The absence of coherent speech, or indeed any overt analogue of unmediated human thought or feeling, is briefly relieved in the micro-dialogue which occurs in 'is that all enough to find out'.

While such features stand out, they seem at first to lead nowhere. To the questions 'who's talking?' or 'what's being said?' they offer no ready answer. We are thrown back on the bare presence of certain patterns, certain sounds, certain possible ideas. The jarring incoherence that prevails leads to the overall impression of meaning being in suspension; of the need to keep waiting for some further, overarching image or clinching statement to come along and resolve things. And yet, while we wait, that focus on bare pattern alerts us to smaller, more mobile potentialities. Our ear is drawn to the minute particulars of the language surface. For example, in contrast to the snippets of legal and scientific discourse, there is a submerged image of a landscape. This is implied by details like 'climb' and 'waymark', while even 'paved with joy' and 'travel the floor boarded over' suggest movement, albeit over some separating membrane. Rhythm heightens this awareness. Coming after the preceding rammed-together chunks of verbiage, we feel distinctly how 'fondly accusing all objects of all thought | paved with joy and stirred in a hefty basin' briefly widens the channel of syntax and grammar, permitting the sense to flow, or rather, permitting a sense *of* flow. A similar moment occurs in 'travel the floor boarded over'; another brief run of connected speech. It seems significant that we hear Wordsworth – ' all objects of all thought' – within this dilated rhythmic moment:

> For I have learned
> To look on nature, not as in the hour
> Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
> The still, sad music of humanity,
> Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
> To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,

> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.
> ('Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey')[10]

The poem, certainly, no longer looks on Wordsworth, or nature, or anything, 'as in the hour | Of thoughtless youth'; and in hearing its music we certainly don't hear 'The still, sad music of humanity,' or any such 'idiotic grace-notes summed in trillions'. What we 'hear' is the constant undercutting of such unifying, elevating and aestheticising instincts. Where Wordsworth felt 'A presence that disturbs me with the joy | Of elevated thoughts', *Kazoo Dreamboats* offers the truly disturbing, emphatically un-elevated image of joy clamped firmly to the earth, suffocating thought: 'all objects of all thought | paved with joy'. And where the Lake poet received 'a sense sublime | Of something far more deeply interfused,' Prynne's 'interfusion' is of a great mash or stew: 'stirred in a hefty basin'. An apt image of the poem itself.

Such allusive teasing is one way that the poem goes about 'fondly accusing' Wordsworth's vision, even as it absorbs, and modulates, his apprehension of 'A motion and a spirit, that impels'. Such ambiguity is central to its operations. We do not need to decide if the poem is 'accusing' Wordsworth himself, or his unifying vision of nature, or any such vision, or the poem's own use of Wordsworth, or literally 'all objects of all thought'; it seems to be doing all at once (with 'seems' taking all the weight, confirming nothing and allowing everything). At the same time, it validates what it accuses; first by drawing out its various possibilities, second by drawing them back into the suggestive flux of its language. The poem after all does offer a unified vision of things and thoughts, one to which Wordsworth has now fruitfully contributed, even while being 'fondly' teased; this must be since so the poem's vision is defined by such ambiguity and plurality of attitude; contradiction, after all, is where mind and matter meet. Indeed the citation of Wordsworth implicitly invites us to see contradiction as standing in for, or perhaps lying behind, the unitary force of nature, the impelling 'motion' and 'spirit', which he saw as rolling through all things, through both 'the blue sky...and in the mind of man'. Reeve and Kerridge

[10] William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 64.

have described this almost involuntary, reflexive process whereby the poem internally displaces settled senses though jarring catenations of shifts, with characteristic acumen:

In the contrasts between [...] single words and phrases, a technical sense challenges a colloquial or symbolic sense, a sacred sense challenges a secular sense, and a sardonic levity challenges an exalted lyricism. These alternatives circle each other, the momentary emergence of one prompting the other to displace it, sometimes instantly.[11]

By continually challenging and self-challenging in this way, the poem *accuses* all the possible ramifications and implications evoked by its use of Wordsworth, including literally 'all objects of all thought', in the sense of *charging* them: it puts them to proof, in the juridical sense set out in relation to poetic thought ('put under test', 'all under test of how things are', as Prynne says in his essay), while at the same time absorbing them and animating them as energy, as current; incorporating them into its highly charged dialectical circuits. This in turn underpins the suggestive grammatical ambiguity latent in accusing 'all objects *of* all thought', as if the poem was charging – testing, energising – all objects with *being* all thoughts, which in a sense it does. Thus, even if the overall impression of any one passage is of incoherence, the *ambiguity* often coheres, as it does here; it acts as a hub for all the possible meanings, often no more than inchoate glimpses, as they ramify further and further into a zone of dim and tenuous implication.

Perhaps my extrapolation of 'accusing' into 'charging' is pre-empted by the legal diction I noted earlier in this passage. Perhaps it isn't. Perhaps the scientific computation implied in 'measurement...summed in trillions...displacement sets' implies a literal-minded satire of the Wordsworthian insistence on 'all' ('is that all', the passage asks, as if counting money); or perhaps the implication is that it is precisely such a springing reflexive irony, incapable of being chastened and subdued, that treads on pavement and boards, divorced from 'the ground': a true 'dis-placement'. Perhaps this satirised image of landscape, Wordsworth's affective territory savagely undercut, really is the one disclosed in this passage: a landscape overlaid, as if by concrete, with a calculating and reifying gaze, joy made absurdly solid, absurdly 'real'; or perhaps the overlay is the poem's own helpless ironising, which can only undercut and undercut towards further and further irony, never touching bottom. And perhaps this image of a submerged or buried ground or landscape is also enacted in rhythm, the movement of the poem, which briefly flows only to be swallowed once again, choked and subsumed, in the dense tangle

[11] Reeve and Kerridge, p. 11.

of disjunctive language scraps that clog the channel of sense. Perhaps this is so, perhaps not. (Nothing could feel more divorced from 'the ground', or nature in a Wordsworthian sense, than the whirling and roiling soup of language fragments that constitute this poem. Does that explain some of Prynne's confusion, as a poet who has long cherished Wordsworth, towards his own poetic history and convictions?) The main point is that the poem enables and nourishes precisely this kind of playful, lateral, quasi-libidinous connection-making; because it charges so many small conflicting particles, so many 'bonded base-pairs', and dynamises them in directions the reader, at the poem's promiscuous suggestion, may creatively elaborate. Have I built too much from too scanty materials? Perhaps. Is such a reading sufficient? We might borrow the poem's phrase, 'enough to find out'.

This process, this 'finding out', strung out over thirty-odd pages, creates quite a sensation. The whole thing, from end to end, is dizzying. Phrases and contrasts sparkle and vanish, leaving brief sun-spot impressions on the mind. But almost every sentence, when you settle on it, reveals, in a slower torquing within the breathless scurry, a surprising precision of ambiguity; in grammar, in syntax, in the polysemy of individual words; each of whose many fields of semantics and rhythm and stress are reabsorbed, like memory, inside the texture. But none of this leads to an outcome; there's no finished product of thought it seems; rather it's this process, of pressure brought through the reading, inducing one thought from the next, which forms the aim, and the effect, of this work. It starts and finishes much, at once. And that simultaneity of so many things, obscurity hosting clarity, all cathected with passionate purpose, is how mind and matter share each other's substance, in the poem.

* * *

'I saw', the poem keeps saying:

> Along the corridor of near frequency, I saw willing and discrete
> the season (p. 639)

That starts us off. And 'I saw' recurs continually thereafter:

> At mass inlet dissent
> I saw ahead to eyeshot reach exacted coating fricative and locked (p. 639)

I saw the slide markers they were sticky and concluded
what was (p. 640)

The poem is a vision. But, as these examples show, the content of the vision resists visualisation: a 'willing and discrete' season, something 'ahead to eyeshot', and best of all, the sticky world-concluding 'slide markers' (I am unable to say what these might be). Such resistance deflects, rather than repels, our attention. Instead of seeing, we 'hear' the vision, as the plural jostlings of its phrases and phonemes. As David-Antoine Williams has remarked, 'the poem is...*heteroglossically* a dream vision'[12] (my emphasis). *Kazoo Dreamboats*, dream vision: and one of the things we 'hear' in the recurring particle 'I saw', is another voice, another 'I saw', from another great poetic dream vision, *Piers Plowman*. That poem opens as follows:

In a somer seson, whan soft was the sonne,

Soon the 'I' falls asleep beside a river, and his dream begins:

As I biheeld into the eest an heigh to the sonne,
I seigh a tour on a toft treiliche ymaked,
A deep dale bynethe, adongeon therinne,
With depe diches and derke and dreadfulle of sighte.
A fair feelde ful of folk fond I ther bitwene –
Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche,
Werchynge and wandrynge as the world asketh.[13]

Kazoo Dreamboats likewise opens with a 'season', adapting Langland's 'I seigh'. The second sentence deepens the echo:

On the plate in soft season to rise hungry semi-
apt for supplement will to set affirm this wit at will for passion
reflex acutely, I saw it amount in plenteous access burning by folly
markers right to the crest (p. 639).

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[12] David-Antoine Williams, *The Life of Words: Etymology and Modern Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 140.

[13] William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman* (London: Everyman, 1995), pp. 1-2.

In 'soft season'; when 'soft was the sonne'. Perhaps this is also the Prynne's way of 'Werchynge and wandrynge' – working and wandering – back and forth over the textual terrain of the English poetic record; echoing, adapting, reincorporating, teasing, *charging*. Such activity and movement grounds the 'vision' of Prynne's poem. A vision which rests upon alert ears.

Prynne has emphasised the importance of Langland to *Kazoo Dreamboats*, commenting on how surprised he was at finding the 'extremely unexpected and forceful presence of Langland and the *Piers Plowman* enterprise' impinging on its composition. 'He just appeared.' Prynne adds.[14] Yet Langland's appearance goes to the root of the poem's form, as well as its 'vision'. Williams remarks that, 'the poem performs a vision of existence modeled on Langland's visionary *Piers Plowman*.' He goes on note that Prynne's use of the model involves keeping Langland's voice firmly in view: 'Prynne's world is still that of *Piers Plowman* – or at least is partially derived from that world, in which 'a fair field full of folk' stands allegorically for the world of the living. Langland's metaphor may be utterly transformed in the 'dream' of *Dreamboats*, but his language can be heard everywhere.'[15] *Kazoo Dreamboats* adapts Langland's metaphor – the dream – to a new 'field', in such a way that his 'folk' remain allegorically present in the poem at the most literal level, that of the words. Indeed, the 'folk' populating the 'field' of the poem are Langland and the other poets whose voices are continuously blended in and out of the verse. These 'folk' stand allegorically for the world of the living, in Williams's terms, in the sense that they collectively embody the human voice in a condition of timelessness (though the irony of these being the voices of the dead keeps such conclusions precarious).

In speaking of Langland, Prynne implies a kinship of concern between them:

> the structural contradictions in Langland's thought were so central to the whole idea of his being a poet and doing the tasks of poetry. The Franciscan idea of a sacred poverty was so important to him and was so visibly violated by everything in the social world around him. He cares deeply, and is worried stiff by what kind of answers he can find to the questions of human conduct, the questions of equitable justice, the questions of honorable satisfaction of one's sacred religious duties.

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[14] Dolven and Kotin, p. 199.

[15] Williams, pp. 140-1.

Even if it feels somewhat inevitable, given his own preoccupations as incarnated in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, that Prynne would impute 'structural contradictions' to the mind of a poet he admired enough to involve so closely in his own poem, he goes on to add a fascinating gloss on Langland's technical choices in relation to the line of verse: 'The line movement and the whole structure of these rather long lines that Langland writes are movements of profound worry. He suffered this poem, and didn't avoid what writing it seems to have thrust upon him.'[16]

The notion of the long line as embodying a movement 'of profound worry' might serve equally well for Prynne's poem. Given Langland's preoccupations, such a movement implies some kind of working out, some logical and emotional effort of reconciliation, which nonetheless remains unresolved. The long lines of *Kazoo Dreamboats* involve a similar process of working out, or working through, a zone of continuous unresolvedness. Here, the lines seem to be working the language, and perhaps also the very concerns expressed in that language, of the English poetic record, into a new kind of 'field': the labour performed by the poem is not just in the textual field but in the electromagnetic one as well: the field of the timeless human voice with its constant concern for equity (here we might remember Prynne's comments on poetic conscience) with the field of object-reality itself, a zone of being which permits no access to the human voice. Luke Roberts touches on this dynamic principle at the heart of the poem when he remarks that, 'human agency, the history of which is recorded in the language, joins in with the motion of the natural world, right down to the level of the particle. If contradiction does inhere in things, language inheres in things, too, registered as the motion of sound.'[17]

This process of blending two different planes – human agency and the level of the particle – is the work undertaken in the long lines of *Kazoo Dreamboats*; that is their movement and their worrying concern, though the poem's tenor is more teasing and evasive than worrying. As Bruns notes,

Kazoo Dreamboats is a work of metaphysics in which what the "I" of the poem sees is no longer "a fair field full of folk" but a variable series of force fields (electro magnetic, linguistic, and even musical) whose patterns and elements follow models of chaos and complexity rather than any principle of linearity or noncontradiction.

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[16] Dolven and Kotin, p. 199.

[17] Roberts, para. 13.

That essentially is the vision of the poem. As Bruns also remarks, the vision is internal to the poem's working, rather than a perceived world that is projected through it: 'Like *Piers Plowman*, *Kazoo Dreamboats* is a visionary poem, but one whose point of view seems internal to the turbulence of what is seen'.[18]

The vision is not 'of' something. It occurs in real time, just as our reading of the poem happens in real time. The poem is concerned with blending human being with inhuman things, under the unifying aegis of contradiction, but its vision is the process by which we, in reading it, assemble, intuit or *feel* its concerns; it unfolds in how we receive and channel its charge. Since the poem's charge can be channeled in many ways, the feeling is connected to how we do that work of channeling, and the poem seems very aware of the power of feeling involved in making and drawing connections. So though the poem says 'I saw', it communicates no coherent content of vision; instead it continuously deflects our attention onto the process of seeing, and that close attention to connection-making underlies seeing What There Is: since in this sense, a deep visionary insight into the life of things is united with a more prosaic sense of simply seeing what's about. Here object-reality and human subjectivity are combined.

* * *

And yet the background to this seeing is the everpresence of fracture; the vision somehow must emerge from incoherence. The first impression when reading the poem is of impossible depth. But with gradual accommodation to its rhythm, or the switching between rhythms, this light-and-dark effect, we fall in step with it; an odd step. The spatial understanding of meaning dissolves. The poem's meaning, we come to feel, will not be *found*. The work's fracturing, like its coherence, is actual and temporal:

> the location
> is obscure because coherence is not spatial and is without meaning
> beyond its scrap value (p. 645)

Fracture, in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, is not performative, of social collapse, ecological collapse or any collapse. Fracture, fragmentation, the restless movement between different flows, however we characterise it, conduces actually to a sense of unity. The surface is all that's happening. And the

[18] Bruns, pp. 58-9.

switching maintains a sense of real time, of flow; and this is equally an image of endlessness. This is why, as you spread your voice along the poem, compelled, hesitating at each juncture, towards uncertain interpretation, in rhythm and syntax and stress, you're abruptly visited by ideas you have to call your own; and revisiting the text in the light of these ideas, your mind discloses further connections and arrangements supporting and extending them. The ideas seem to rise from a deeper consciousness that the poem is always summoning: the consciousness of language itself, perhaps. The more you read, the more the links appear: and the chief discoveries are your own questionings, intimately woven into the language, justifying and contesting them, with your own sense of things always to the fore. The flow, self-thwarting rather than smooth, is a means of releasing thought: your thought.

D. W. Harding has explored the role of rhythm in activating this kind of engagement: 'It seems to me probably', he writes, 'that, rather than according directly with particular emotional states, rhythm reflects – or, more properly, is itself part of – the energy conditions that accompany emotion.'[19] The self-thwarting, self-contesting rhythm of *Kazoo Dreamboats* seems to do this very thing, but on a slightly altered plane: its rhythm reflects not so much the energy conditions accompanying emotion, as the energy conditions accompanying thought, though the thinking being done is itself coloured somewhat by emotion, a kind of rapt exhilaration. The point is that the rhythm both absorbs, and feeds, the thinking energies of the reader.

This collaboration with the reader in sense-making is a vital cohering strategy. What feels obscure from the point of view of meaning is doing something through its tempo:

> Being joyous conveyed at submerged reduct closest to zero, no
> retardation screening a cleanly inverse-cube function goes to unity
> via transform at itself minimum unlocked, of no more than its moment
> (p. 646).

The neutered speed perceptibly crunching together the scraps of jargon is its main meaning: its rhythm is jerky, impersonal, overbearing, coercive, pressuring. Part of the very effect of that alien rhythm, or non-rhythm, however, is to pass an emotional current through these abstract technical terms: when contrasted with 'Being joyous', whatever 'retardation screening a cleanly

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[19] D. W. Harding, *Words into Rhythm: English Speech Rhythm in Verse and Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 101.

inverse-cube function' might mean, we feel these terms immediately as heavy and oppressive; we instinctively respond to them as exerting an affective force, though such force might last 'no more than its moment'. Their dense current, or charge, in turn, sharpens the contrasting charge we feel in the more open and dilated rhythmic channel:

> Our morning hymn this is, and
> song at evening echo confuted by shared antagonism, implicit not
> by next coming-to-be as the world is transformed in feature full
> of folk by what it is not, time-locked against spokes in the cycle
> of saying so (p. 643).

We might recognise 'Our morning hymn this is' as a citation from Sidney's 'Ye Goatherd Gods' sestina; or we might not. What the poem seems to ask us to respond to is not, necessarily, the role of Sidney here, but rather the feeling of the contrast between Sidney's words and words like 'retardation screening', quoted above. By this interplay of contrasts, we begin, even before we derive any *sense* of and from these words, to experience them as obliquely *impassioned*. The composer Erik Ulman has described this with great insight: 'Prynne approaches music's indefinite power through overload, so that the speed and ambiguity of collisions, although inviting sustained study and interpretation, elicit emotions, thought and analogical perception before they resolve (if ever) into an unambiguous meaning.'[20] These 'collisions' are emphasised by the jarring contrast in the different kinds of diction present. On the one hand, 'Our morning hymn this is, and | song at evening echo' signals some ambient pastoral feeling which the attribution of the words to Sidney would only reinforce: its supple and cadenced lyric movement is rich and nebulous, full of round pauses, lucid to its own resonance. On the other hand, the following words, 'confuted by shared antagonism, implicit' immediately strike against this flow, suggesting some colder, hasher, objectifying agency. This juxtaposition is a mode of oblique embodiment, giving the words a physical and affective presence despite the apparent absence of referentiality, even of meaning. We might even say that the very absence of clear meaning is designed to draw our attention more closely to the interplay of formal features such as the movements in rhythm and diction.

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[20] Erik Ulman, 'Composing with Prynne', in *A Manner of Utterance: The Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Ian Brinton (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2009), pp. 145-161 (p. 154).

Heightened by contrast, the poem's language, even at its densest and most obscure, accrues an oblique sensuality: a sensuality that derives from different words belonging to the particular affective climate of their rhythm, which the contest in rhythms in turn sharpens and enriches. It is in this very bare, very stark, formalist structure that the process of *feeling* our thought, as it develops and shifts in flow with the poem's twitches and modulations, becomes possible: a process in which we do not end up thinking *something* – it's rather that we come, by stages, to feel our own *thinking*. This bare, but strangely sensual process – of experiencing the proliferation of connections and of ourselves making them – seems to be what matters, and how we assemble the poem's vision of unity out of its unvarying condition of incoherence and fracture. Michael Tencer touches on this process when considering Prynne's 1999 collection, *Pearls That Were*. At the heart of that volume, he argues, is 'the fragility of finely wrought structures [...] and how the measure of those structures is altered depending upon the observer's placement, the play of light through them, and the effect of the passage of time.'[21] Equally, while the passage of time and the play of light might, by the implied involvement of the reader-observer, imply a kind of embracing universality, Prynne is ever ready to brace against any intimation of a warm hearth-glow, as Nigel Wheale has noted: 'Prynne's poetic surely doesn't possess [...] benign universality.'[22] The poem pushes us away even as it draws us in.

This process in Prynne's poetry has been well chronicled. Identifying the move in Prynne's poetry towards a 'metonymic and etymological challenge to the reader', David Caddy casts the process of reading in dynamic terms: as a journey, 'a continual process, towards meaning and comprehension rather than finding answers.' Caddy's simple recommendations for this process remain valid: 'look at the words and phrases you recognise, assess the range of their meaning, look at the associations and connections that come to mind, and start asking questions of each word, phrase and line.'[23] This scanty, precarious but potentially richly insightful process fits Caddy's description of Prynne's work – 'as if it were written in a desert' – and chimes with a similarly climatic evocation given by John Douglas Templeton: 'It is a very exciting rush as the constantly shifting meanings of a poem speed in such a way as they always seem just within grasp before disappearing [...] like smoke. As clouds form and reform they are in a constant

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[21] Michael Tencer, '*Pearls That Were*', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 15–41 (p. 22).

[22] Nigel Wheale, 'Crosswording. Paths Through *Red D Gypsum*', in *A Manner of Utterance*, pp. 163–185 (p. 182).

[23] David Caddy, 'Notes Towards a Preliminary Reading of J. H. Prynne's *Poems'*, in *A Manner of Utterance*, pp. 23–35 (pp. 23–4).

process. Just as they seem to have formed a shape it immediately collapses into some new form.'[24] Timothy Thornton sees in this shapeshifting the very basis of Prynne's later work: 'Images [...] seem to recur again and again in slightly altered form; structures or shapes of thought apparently unconnected slowly accumulate an obscure or inscrutable similarity, forming networks of constellations of ideas, without of course ever coming truly to coalesce.'[25] John Wilkinson connects the generation and reintegration, in reading, of these networks to memory: 'that is how memory works in these poems, through apprehending "recurrent points of reference" in their networks, rather than a shared experience of a rainy day in Wales or lost love.' This is also, argues Wilkinson, a form of extension of the text: or rather, the poems only fully exist as a mode of 'piecemeal exchange and identification' that is realised as potential meaning in memory: 'this piecemeal exchange and identification, along with what a reader adduces from his or her memory and knowledge, leads to a gratifying sense of reintegration whereby the text is fulfilled by the reader's involvement and the reader fulfilled by the text.'[26] It is curious that the best descriptions of Prynne's poems are often descriptions of the feeling or experience of reading them. Thornton captures and crystallises this observation when he states emphatically of the image-networks he identifies, that they 'do not describe something beyond what they are'.[27]

At the same time, *Kazoo Dreamboats*, like any poem by Prynne, really does have its own 'thought'; its images do suggest something beyond the mere words; and this needs to be described in a way that doesn't rely on vague notions of the reader being 'fulfilled' by the poem. The 'reference cues' annexed to the poem, a sort of field guide to its preoccupations, makes clear that the poem derives its focus and energy from the combinations of certain ideas: ideas we find in music theory, early Greek philosophy and scientific theories of forces. The poem is a hymn to the dialectics of matter and thought – and the words and ideas of Parmenides and Alban Berg, and the activity of subatomic particles, are the alto, tenor and bass that blend in its overall polyphony; what Wilkinson aptly calls 'a monism incorporating its own dynamic divisibility'.[28] But I wish to account for the fact that, well before we experience the poem's words as

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[24] John Douglas Templeton, 'Many voices: *singing*', in *A Manner of Utterance*, pp. 133-44 (p. 139).

[25] Timothy Thornton, '*Acrylic Tips*', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 77-85 (p. 79).

[26] John Wilkinson, 'Silicon Versets at Work, *Blue Slides at Rest*', in *Kazoo Dreamboats*', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 101-112 (pp. 104-5).

[27] Thornton, p. 80.

[28] Wilkinson, p. 103.

suggesting *ideas*, we are confronted by its words as merely *words*. For the poem seems at first far more interested in the *vocabulary* of a particular discourse, than in the propositions it might involve. And the reason for this, I think, is to pour this vocabulary into a stream, a flux, in which language acquires the affective identity of a protagonist; and any ideas that emerge from that language must acknowledge that priority of arrangement.

From particle physics, molecular chemistry, quantum mechanics, and electro-magnetism, not to exhaust the list, Prynne draws out a dense abstract denotative vocabulary which gains, upon absorption into the texture of the poem, a strangely sensuous presence. Gradually their carapace of inert instruction acquires an inner being; as naturally dramatic and richly expressive deep-physical processes. By interfusion with rhythm and affective rhetoric, the hard shell of instrumental language fills with an unexpected resonance; and the surprise feeds back inside the stream of utterance. This method eroticises language.

> From itself auto-immune the bit force of covalency is uniquely sexual, what is not is to be what is and due, corrosion impact seminal and sublingual dissolved, shudder to part, part to whole, not complete. Enter the time stream arbitrarily, chance by random necessity in its flux at concept of unfinish: the lamp decays by renewal, floating wick not within question or scarce at all for tenderness (p. 644).

Though certain words suggest directly such eros ('uniquely sexual...seminal...dissolved, shudder'), the shifts in density and tempo of the rhythm over the whole passage, between for example 'Enter the time stream arbitrarily' and 'flux at concept of unfinish', allow us to feel the poem's movement as something strong, physical, immediate, irrespective of 'meaning'. It is the equivalent to a poem's meter. And this meter, this switching of rhythms, this jarring in the flow, unfolding a barren sensuality of juxtaposed discourses, is gradually converted into an energy; an energy which is also an idea, a concept: the concept of contradiction at the level of the physical substrate: covalent bonding, braced counterforces at the subatomic level, core-tensions along electrical poles, oppositional charges – these are patterned to evoke warring energies bound in a unitary field. In this way the poem spreads its picnic blanket over the interstice between atomic and cosmic planes. And we *feel* it as much as think it; since we feel our own thinking as it transforms mere words into an energy we can only define in conceptual terms.

The poem's grammar and syntax play an important part in this process. Commenting on *Unanswering Rational Shore* of 2001, Lisa Jeschke has described the activity Prynne has worked into his late poems in a way that fits very well with *Kazoo Dreamboats*: 'The constant self-disruption of syntactical connectivity leads to a focus on the paradigmatic level, on the study of words and groups of words – as bits and pieces, shards, ruins'.[29] Indeed, the meter of *Kazoo Dreamboats* inhere as much in its syntax and grammar as in its use of rhythm, which in any case, cannot really be separated from them.

This is because almost every sentence allows for a differentiation in the ways in which subjects, verbs and objects can be put together. To return to the quote above, when we read 'shudder to part, part to | whole, not complete.' we can feel the pressure of ambiguity working through the syntax. At first 'shudder to part' suggests the emotional reluctance of leaving; and given the erotic shading of the passage, we might imagine a pained parting of two lovers. However, the next iteration of part, 'part to | whole', transposes the verb into noun, with the chiasmus 'to part, part to' establishing a kind of mutuality the line quickly undermines, with 'part to | whole' establishing a totally different relationship to that between the lovers: mutuality is replaced by hierarchy. At the same time, the erotic undertone is covertly elaborated with a comic homophone, the sexual sense of 'part' meeting the 'hole' we also hear in 'whole'. Perhaps this multiplicity of implication explains why the whole (hole?) sequence is 'not complete'.

The point is not to choose one line of meaning but to 'hear' various possibilities at the same time; and the long lines of *Kazoo Dreamboats* are central to enabling and enriching this process. The prose body of the poem means the reader is given wider scope to interpret and cobble; grammatical choices are made and syntactical blocks are fixed and sequenced in each reading; but these can change; the work has eschewed determinateness, its wellhead of ambiguity is constantly overrunning. The fact of its line breaks allows the poem to enhance ambiguity at that end of the spectrum. Rhythm offers no reliable guide to stable grammatical assembly; for different channels of meaning hover between the words on the page and their actualisation in the reading mind or voice. Instead of discrete sentences, we read, or rather *feel*, open patterns continuously reforming. To consider the first sentences again:

> Along the corridor of near frequency I saw willing and discrete

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[29] Lisa Jeschke, 'Late Early Poetry: A Commentary on J. H Prynne's *Unanswering Rational Shore'*, in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 61-76 (p. 69).

> the season not yet for sorrow advanced, nearby not yet even so
> inference to claim. On the plate in soft season to rise hungry semi-
> apt for supplement will to set affirm this wit at will for passion
> reflex acutely (p. 639).

The insistent tug, or helpless tic, pulling echoes back inside the shell ('season…season…not yet…not yet') suggests how we might read the seemingly important word 'frequency'. The reading will not unfurl in one line. The patterns are returns; and not circular – 'frequency' is onward movement through space, projecting, then catching up its echo, until, incorporating itself in this way, it holds its sense above the line, as a composite of glowing recurrences. The patches of urgent murmur ('not yet…sorrow advanced…to rise hungry…will to set…for passion') supply a strong emotional undertow; a background receptivity or wave-length of strong feeling, rather than a direct link to a subjective voice. By inscribing this unresolved and interstitial sensibility across the sentences and not within them, in a way that's additive and unresolving, so that it soaks the language as a whole, the poem's language, while lacking a root in any particular human subject, or indeed in firm subjectivity per se, still manages to harbour within itself a vivid interiority of powerful feelings. This process is articulated quite neatly in Prynne's 2006 volume, *To Pollen*:

> By inversion of
> subject the grammar yields to novel clamour, days
> pass like spilled water. Flow chants, name the way[30]

By turning subjectivity inside out – the 'inversion of | subject' – we find a 'novel clamour', where grammatical plurality, syntactical ambiguity, and an affect that has not been concentrated in the subject, but widely diffused into the poem ('like spilled water') form the wonky *beat* of *Kazoo Dreamboats*. A semantic multiplicity always spawning collateral lines of meaning. Across the sentences each strand of meaning can be separated from the others and studied towards its end and then woven back in. That happens instinctively in any reading; but it's perhaps subordinate to the splendid absorption of plurality itself: the rich pressure it introduce into the poem is what accounts for that odd, occasionally thrilling sense we get reading the poem of our minds being overwhelmed *and* undernourished. (This underpins what Anthony Mellors is getting at when he archly but accurately said of Prynne's surplus of semantic ambiguity: 'Whether you want to call

[30] *Poems*, p. 589.

this dialectic or mere equivocation depends on how you are disposed towards the rigours of Prynne's poetic.')[31]

> All now lateral burning fence off at will foremost
> to link repulse, to limit of done mania assembled across cosset for
> slag and reck as a nail kingdom who will inflect this full upper
> declension of substance (p. 640).

The language here exudes something, a pure power of intentionality – exerted from the wrong side as it were: it impresses by the force of a drama whose constituent figures seem at first hidden or withheld. The cumulative effect of emotive words, and words of crisis ('burning', 'to limit', 'nail kingdom'), together the urgency of rhetorical markers ('All now', 'who will inflect') seem to displace the sense of crisis from the personal or psychological plane onto the level of language activity itself, animated around the contrasts and shifts and detours. It is as if Prynne has found a way to achieve the cleaving and springing force of a line-break while staying within the line, so that the energy of each sentence mounts through the aggregate of breaks.

Another important feature in this regard is the use of conjunctions and rhetorical markers: later, yet, but, thus etc.[32] These little ordering parts, pipe-joints and articulations that lets the argument flow in logical continuity through the sentences, here expand their sense laterally from their ordinary purpose. Here they usher in an alternate, non-successive and parallel logic, where multiple and contradictory ideas and phrases run concurrently, uncompeting but mutually enriching. Logical sequence chooses a single line of direction, but *Kazoo Dreamboats* performs the refusal to exclude; its method recuperates those pieces of excluded thought and language and possibility which logical successiveness must cast out. But its method is not illogical or irrational, but multi-logical, and infolding simultaneous and parallel rationalities. Thus the poem often recasts conjunctions as subjects themselves (the italics are mine):

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[31] Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 124.

[32] Prynne's interest in loading a larger, more vatic usage onto such innocuous words extends to prepositions. Glance at the index of titles and first lines at the back of *Poems* and consider how many poems begin with 'As', 'By', 'For', 'In', 'Now', 'On', 'So', or 'What'. Apart from 'The', these are the most common beginnings.

Can this *or* be (p. 643)

Thus is
tantamount to negation of the negation (p. 660)

Once again this diverts focus away from the secret organiser-figure of the poet, and onto the thinking of language itself, pushing across the gaps, including them all. This completes the important process Prynne advocates in 'Poetic Thought':

> strong poetic thought does indeed demand the unreserved commitment of the poet, deep-down within the choices and judgments of dialectical composition; but before the work is completed, the poet must self-remove from this location, sever the links not by a ruse but in order finally to test the integrity of the result. Indeed, until this removal is effected, the work cannot be truly complete, so that the new-discovered and extended limits of poetic thought form the language boundaries of the new work.[33]

This is the line of thought that Keston Sutherland has attempted to develop and expound. He has set about explaining Prynne's notion of 'poetic thought' by reference to the rejection of subjectivity: 'it is only after the language of ordinary subjectivity [...] has been exceeded and ruptured at its furthest edge that poetic thought can appear'. Sutherland goes on to say that, 'What is reached at that far edge is *absolutely original truth*, foreign to the poetic subject and its personal life, foreign even to subjectivity itself'.[34] If the essence of the poem – what Sutherland identifies as the border of 'absolutely original truth' – lies on the far side of subjectivity, then how are we to even know it, whatever it might be? Yet here the very 'feeling' induced by the poem through its formal, rhythmic and grammatical idiosyncrasies, its *charge*, might provide some guidance. For what these methods suggest is a process of knowing and understanding that potentially bypasses a more standard process of intentional cognition. And understanding the reasons the poem pursues such a course might also lead us towards its 'truth'. This is something we can now try to explore more fully.

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[33] 'Poetic Thought', p. 598.

[34] Keston Sutherland, 'Introduction', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 9-14 (p. 11).

II
WHAT IT MIGHT MEAN

The poem addresses What There Is. Its ideas on the subject involve speculations on the nature of matter and mind. It surveys Mao, Parmenides, and particle physics. However, what feels convincing about the poem – what helps us *experience* its concerns – are not the ideas per se, but the energy that flows into, and out of, their connection and combination. Through an extreme unresolvedness and ambiguity, which takes any reading up, down and around a manifold of possible sense-paths, it dramatises the excitement and energy of *potential*, of what *might* be the case, of what its sentences and ideas *might* mean. Prynne's poetry has always been predicated on potential in this way: his poems are possible structures, full of possible meanings, auguring possible futures. At their best his poems persuasively combine these subjunctive aspects to make rich possibility feel immanent to our present moment, and therefore an inherent feature of immediate being. But even by these standards *Kazoo Dreamboats* goes very far. Reality, if it exists in the poem, exists *only* in potential, and perhaps only in the kind of potential that poetry is most adept at releasing. Perhaps because poetry, or poetic *thought*, is best adapted to convert potentiality into actuality, or to incorporate the essence of the former in the structure of the latter. Poetry in this sense is a living body of potential – a body we make manifest in creative intellection. Perhaps this explains the technique by which Prynne infuses inert language with emotive, even erotic power: the poem is a massive gesture of embrace, a way of getting at What There Is by a thinking that encompasses, and pierces through, What There Is Not:

> This is and must be the thought of nothing that
> cannot be apart from what is, neither as or by cause, what it is
> to be, relentless and unsame (p. 640).

Relentless and unsame. The long lines of *Kazoo Dreamboats* exert force locally; they also allow us to feel the flash of connections over and between the sentences, so that, while the poem's energy of idea remains fluid and unstable, and liable to take new directions, its vividness, as it were, accumulates over the poem as a whole. This is what allows us to hold and unify contradictory ideas, what is and what is not, without collapsing the one into the other. There's no hypothetical whole to which the parts must finally answer; there is the *real* whole, a constant of energy, coming and going relentlessly ('born frequently all over the place' p. 655); a whole composed of mutually enriching, mutually conflicting parts:

Lay down for loyal
self-refusing, all to see as the stream of its parts (p. 646)

the sequence not
seated on time but constant part for more whole, the final negative
is end not sum (p. 643)

Kazoo Dreamboats is always teasing us with wholes and parts, suggesting that it should be read as if the former inhered in the latter. The punning scraps quoted above tell us the poem is not a 'sum' to be worked out, nor even the 'sum of its parts', but a mutable 'whole' composed again and again of its flowing particles as they merge and part and then recombine in fresh configurations. As Rod Mengham justly writes of Prynne's approach to parts and wholes: 'each verbal phenomenon contains many, if not all, of the threads which the whole fabric of the text is composed.'[35] What are these parts? Are they the constituents of its thought? How can there be any thought when everything seems to happen at once? As the poem says, 'the molecule is severally pandemic' (p. 642). But perhaps, the poem suggests, if we relinquish the sequencing instinct – the instinct that asks us to choose between what is and what is not, and trammel the processes of cognition into sequential order – we might arrive at a vision of the 'all' as a 'stream of… parts'; indeed the all, the whole, expands to the extent that it retains its constancy to parts.

So the poem rejects sequence. Sequence must be replaced by a mechanics of recursion, an axle-revolution of echoes; a frequency. The memory of certain phrases infuses our reading, so that when we feel fresh connection the whole poem, it seems, glows with fresh energy. There can be no 'sequence' in such a fluid, dynamic, amorphous structure. Sequence, as a temporalising agent, crystallising vertebrate structure from amorphous flow, is a cause that predicts its own effects: :

The cause of sequence presumes its afterbirth (p. 642)

This echoes an earlier thought from Prynne's 1969 volume, *The White Stones*:

the facts
in succession, they *are* succession

[35] Rod Mengham, "A Free Hand to Refuse Everything': Politics and Intricacy in the Work of J. H. Prynne', in in *A Manner of Utterance*, pp. 69-82 (pp. 75-6).

('The Glacial Question, Unsolved')[36]

Seen like this, sequence equally presumes a kind of logic, or rhythm of thought: deductive, linear, placing one thing after another. The poem, we feel, is deliberately resisting this; and it seems to organise its ideas on mind, or thought, and matter, around a new polarity, or bond. Thought and matter are united, the poem suggests, in their porosity to the turbulence of waves. Like empty space itself, we stand inside a 'turmoil of electromagnetic waves of all frequencies and wave-lengths. They wash through us and past us' (p. 640). Thoughts and things, like waves, are momentary blips, pop-up constitutions in the stream. In neither is there the 'still point' offered up in the *Four Quartets*:

> At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;
> Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,
> But neither arrest nor movement.
> ('Burnt Norton')[37]

So says Eliot. To which Prynne responds:

> Still point of a turning world self-deluded in unthought anyone could
> purchase indulgence at cost still nothing even the zero-field is in-
> flected, by charge and currency (p. 652)

The entry of Eliot's less frantic, but similarly long-lined poem here sets off one of those 'movements of profound worry' that Prynne identifies in Langland's lines. The passage explicitly references one of the primary concerns that caused Langland so much worry: the sale of indulgences; the cleansing of the soul, for cash: 'purchase indulgence'. But 'worry' also seems too strong, too febrile, to capture the process at work here; Prynne's line questions, teases, interrogates, accuses and counter-accuses the implications of Eliot's phrase; it *charges* them, and charges itself *with* them. Eliot's 'still point' refers to the concentration of subjectivity on itself, at first set against a whirling chaotic world, but ultimately leading to an emptying of the self into that world, to join in the dance where there is 'neither arrest nor movement'. To Prynne, particularly in the strongly anti-subjectivist mode of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, this is not pure

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[36] *Poems*, p. 66.

[37] T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber, 1969), p. 173.

subjectivity stripped of the dense intervening structures of selfhood, but pure 'indulgence' – a degraded transactional self-other relationship in which the subject stands over and against a hostile world, from which moral vantage it may procure a spurious humility. It is a careless neglect of hard thinking, 'self-deluded in unthought', that degenerates into a spiritual costuming available to everyone at the right price: 'anyone could | purchase indulgence'. To Eliot's 'still point', the poem responds, as if in mocking retort, 'still nothing', with the implied critique that there can be no 'still point' since 'nothing is still'. The 'zero-field' refers to the ground state energy of all fields in space, also known as the vacuum state. The vacuum state contains fleeting electromagnetic waves and virtual particles that pop into and out of existence at a whim. So there is energy and activity even here: 'even the zero-field is in- | flected, by charge and currency'; even this vacuum state of 'nothing' has 'charge' and 'current'. But 'currency' reconnects us to 'purchase indulgence': even the vacuum state is contaminated by the human instinct to convert reality into something with which we can have a transactional relationship. Perhaps it is language itself that does this: the zero-field is 'in- | flected' (suggesting 'infected)', the poem says, hinting that subatomic particles resemble language particles in their dependence on human articulation and liable to human degradation. And yet, if there is no 'still point', everything must quickly change; and if human subjectivity and human language import 'currency' into the heart of reality, then this is just one of the many things whirling in the flux, one more thought, one more datum concerning matter; and the poem quickly pushes our attention onto something else. Like particles, these moments appear and disappear at a whim.

Pushing through like this, in waves, is how the poem seeks to show how consciousness and object-reality share, quite literally, each other's substance; and through this psychophysical mutuality it attempts to include, in one vision, both what is, and what is not:

> There is no unity
> in mind its line in stolen property its fainting breath absurd:
> a property of the void itself (p. 658).

A disunity of mind – constant part for more whole – permits the total vision. Perhaps this is Prynne, recreating Wordsworth's visionary tranquility: asleep in body, seeing into the life of things. But as we've already seen, the poem is intent on 'fondly accusing' Wordsworth, so we shouldn't allow the comparison to rest there. Indeed Prynne has been explicit about how the poem seeks to challenge his erstwhile poetic exemplar:

> There are remarks in this poem which are directly anti-Wordsworthian digs about the elevation of spirit that Wordsworth so cogently and eloquently propounds. I have believed that kind of worldview, despite the burden of explicit complication that it contains. Implicitly, for all my working life, Wordsworth has been a kind of icon in my way of thinking about the world, for so many different reasons. So, to find Wordsworth becoming a figure of opposition in my writing practise was of great surprise to me.[38]

As with the opposition to Eliot, there can be no 'elevation of spirit' when 'nothing is still', no unity pertains in mind or matter. In particular the poem interrogates the famous lines from 'Tintern Abbey':

> that serene and blessed mood,
> In which the affections gently lead us on,
> Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While with an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.[39]

So says Wordsworth. *Kazoo Dreamboats* says:

> you do not see into the life of things, dimension-
> less or not, except by harvest of data plotted against uncertainty (p. 655).

Prynne belittles the vision of 'the life of things' as belonging to the same plane as Eliot's 'still point': there is simply no stable vantage from which to 'see', and no stable 'life' which can be seen. To cleave to such terms, the poem suggests, is to fall into the numbing embrace of platitudes and banalities, of the kind offered up, we might imagine, by statistical analyses of

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[38] Dolven and Kotin, p. 200.

[39] Wordsworth, *Selected Poems*, pp. 62-3.

health or life-expectancy. In each case, the subject deploys cliché and the law of averages as protective sandbags against the reality of radical uncertainty.

Crucially, in *Kazoo Dreamboats* it is not the 'eye', or indeed any 'I', that sees. Neither harmony nor joy will attune the subject to the vision. The poem overlays contradiction on Wordsworth's deep power – joy – as the sense sublime granting visionary access to What There Is:

> It was
> the deep power of contradiction in dipole scattering brilliance,
> tumid with negation, deep only by customary expletive, that made
> a blaze before the eyes, because you see only by knowing and
> doing what you know (p. 656).

What the poem knows is contradiction, and that is what it does. There may be no unity in mind or matter, but both these things share a substance in contradiction. Contradiction, holding opposites together, not choosing between them, but vacillating richly among the possibilities ('to hesitate between one and another' (p. 641)), is perhaps the closest we can come to the 'elevation of spirit' that Prynne imputes to Wordsworth as a true compass to thought and feeling:

> elevation of spirit as hesitation guides the wandering thought (p. 641)

At the same time, the poem does enact a version of Wordsworth's practice, of laying the self open, in depthless passivity, and letting the body fall into abeyance. Its vision, 'I saw', is one that transcends the material limits of the body, and indeed subjectivity itself, as Sutherland has argued. Robin Purves has also noted that the 'I' of the poem resembles a microscope rather than an agent in human affairs: 'the "I" doesn't function as the hominid begetter of the forces at play in the sentences of the poem and could more easily represent the aperture of a microscope than the forceful intervening of an implied human speaker.'[40]

Accordingly, in the 'blessed mood' of the poem's restless unresolvedness, it is hardly surprising to find that, in the unified vision beyond subjectivity, one of the things 'seen' is contradiction:

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[40] Robin Purves, 'For-Being: Uncertainty and Contradiction in *Kazoo Dreamboats*', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 143–57 (p. 148).

because contradiction is inherent and
not alternate in sense ordering, I saw this notion in full fiery
finesse, alive, alive-o (p. 651).

Such 'seeing' incarnates the very thing under discussion: contradiction as the denial of sequential logic, of the kind that characterises the thinking subject bound to platitudes and the law of averages. The 'I' is capable of seeing it just as we experience something like its effects in the jarring rhythm and multiple syntax of the poem itself. The latent pun on 'I/eye' abstracts the physical, the seeing eye, from the 'I' as pronoun, as a repeated particle of grammatical coherence. In this way the unity of mind and matter, the 'vision', is also a matter of *seeing* selfhood as a linguistic construct, which is a step to *seeing* the absence of subjectivity:

I saw seeing itself dissolve
rail to contest bounded, to scale by inversion not exact vented out
to porous incline, a quantum ledge of known intercostal exclusion.
Thus being-itself deletes far out its consisting notational self-
hood (p. 643)

With subjectivity out of the way, we can *see* thought without a thinker, and object-reality without a subject. We can see presence and absence at once. This is significant, since What There Is, the poem reminds us again and again, must embrace What There Is Not; and this means rescuing nothingness, the void, the vacuum, empty space, from a state of abjection. The two sides must bond:

bonding against its excluded identity not with itself
plane temper countermanding by pronoun slices abyssal. At nil
band without redress cross rated flow back in striate hot-pot fluid
turbulence, measure this against flat signal periodic (p. 645).

Robin Purves, with great insight into the poem's procedures, has written of its approach to contradiction thus: *'Kazoo Dreamboats*, it can be shown, is keen to “trade up” the contradictions found at the most fundamental levels in the structure of organic and inorganic matter and in the absence of any matter whatsoever, in order to disestablish the idea of a "natural" or

"harmonious" relation at any scale and in any circumstance.'[41] Yet, what Purves doesn't go on to show is how his – undoubtedly shrewd and justified – analysis connects to the poem's flow, its rhythm, its body.

I think we *feel* contradiction in the poem as the saying of different things at the same time, in contest with that time. This process is designed to make us feel the working of thought and matter, then thought *as* matter. Contradiction frees us of subjectivity so that we may encounter the real. As Simone Weil said:

> The contradictions the mind comes up against – these are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real.[42]

Contradiction means the stripping of sequential logic from thought, and causality from matter. As Purves notes, '*Kazoo Dreamboats* will have demonstrated its own necessity [...] if it manages to express the dialectic of being and non-being as they operate in their inextricable inter-relation at the quantum level of reality, where the principle of cause-and-effect is not operative.'[43] By removing cause and effect in this way, contradiction allows for a continuous plurality of meaning. And by keeping many lines of inquiry and passionate speculation open at once is how the work does this thinking, and how it must be thought.[44] The way, it appears, is through a kind of cognitive nomadism. Mellors has explored this aspect of Prynne's thought,

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[41] Purves, p. 145.

[42] Simone Weil, 'Contradiction', in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. by Sian Miles, (London: Virago, 1986), p. 259.

[43] Purves, p. 150.

[44] In his lecture on Charles Olson's *Maximus* poems that gave at Simon Fraser University on 27 July 1971 ('On Maximus IV, V, VI', http://charlesolson.org/Files/Prynnelecture1.htm), Prynne elaborates a neat formula for this kind of thinking:

> I mean, we have the glimmers, we have the lurking glimmers of what it's like, and then there comes a point when it could be one thing or the other thing: and we carry the fork in our minds and we go on, and then we come to another point where it could be one thing or another thing, and we carry the fork in our minds. And finally we just yearn for a spoon. I mean, the situation is that desperate.

remarking that, 'Prynne's work is primarily nomadic, not ruling out the possibility of a resting place but insisting that identity is never at home to itself, never more than a contingent point from which we must move on'.[45] This also induces self-forgetfulness;[46] and with the self no longer in heavy occupation of consciousness, the space cleared reveals upon inspection a vitreous centre: here a larger reality, the excluded included, something like the work's real being, can be glimpsed in peripheral arrival:

> nothing changes for this is the self-change of nothing as at sac-
> cadic variance, substantially composed of its moments in transit,
> in the field most winking and unrespected (p. 642).

As argued above, this is something the work tries to make us *feel* as well as *know* through its metre, within the constant ambiguity of syntactical and grammatical construction.

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[45] Mellors, p. 125.

[46] To return to Wordsworth: for the author the *The Prelude*, self-forgetfulness is a mode of outward communion. A flow that self-consciousness, the narrow and social self-consciousness, can impede. Returning home for the summer vacation after his first period in Cambridge, with a painful and isolating alertness to his own alterity in this cherished place, the association between this crust-awareness and outer apparel is not accidental:

> The very garments that I wore appear'd
> To prey upon my strength, and stopp'd the course
> And quiet stream of self-forgetfulness.
> (Book IV, 292-294, p. 61)

(References are to *The Prelude: the 1805 Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)). It's a mode to which children have ready access; and which Wordsworth opposes to the monstrous "dwarf Man" (Book V, 295, p. 75), the acting artificer and reasoner, who 'Takes nothing upon trust' (Book V, 337, p. 76):

> The child, whose love is here, at least, doth reap
> One precious gain, that he forgets himself.
> (Book V, 368-9, p. 77)

floating wick not within question or scarce at
all for tenderness (p. 644).

We traverse as one manifold all the possible fields, keeping close to each separate sense. So the question is both 'scarce at all' *and* 'all for tenderness'. Choosing – sequence – would remove this richness. Here the line-break both poses the question of which meaning to choose, while equally keeping the question unresolved and open.

The point, perhaps, is to *feel* the thinking (the poem's, in collaboration with your own), without thinking too much: without testing, in other words, the poem against a standard of 'how things are' which might conflict with the poem's own standard. One way the poem does this is through the continuous abrupt switching between frequencies in the lexical, semantic, syntactical and tonal fields. This switching keeps the poem 'substantially composed of its moments in transit':

For fields thus filled it was no dream if yet so dear I lay, pronate
attempered pronoun sounded dear heart how suckled, hot pies! (p. 640)

Here the echo of Langland ('a field full of folk') and the 'dream' of Piers Plowman abruptly transmutes into another dream, from Wyatt's poem 'They flee from me, that sometime did me seek':

And she caught me in her armes long and small;
Therewithall swetely did me kysse,
And softely said 'dere hert, how like you this?'

It was no dreme: I lay brode waking.[47]

The positive dream of Piers Plowman bonds with negation in Wyatt: it was no dream. And Wyatt's speaker, lying 'prone' in disbelief, becomes the restless, ever turning pronoun (to pronate is to rotate a limb or joint, turning it into a prone position), the disembodied 'I' of the poem, which when 'sounded' is further modified ('attemper' being to modify a thing's

[47] Sir Thomas Wyatt, *Collected Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 32.

temperature) into a suckling child, cutting against Wyatt's cool tone of wounded awe with a comic roar for 'hot pies'.

The speed of the transformations here seems to be the main point. Like Wyatt's fickle mistress, the line is 'Busely seking with a continuell chaunge.' The movement from one citational background to another and their abrupt adaptation to jarring contrasts in tone and semantic planes short-circuits any attempt to find in it a reality beyond what the poem's language is doing with language. We cannot see 'through' this to the turning world outside. The process keeps our attention fixed at the surface of the poem's words even as it disrupts that surface so that we cannot feel at home on that either. The effect not only emphasises that the poem's 'thought' is not being done by any 'thinker'; it also emphasises that this 'thinking' is also a kind of 'not-thinking'. The transformations lead nowhere; they reach no clear conclusions and permit no clear conclusions from us; above all what we feel is the swiftness of the changes. The line of thought, if we can call it that, is expanding yet discontinuous. The poem paradoxically 'thinks' of Langland and Wyatt, and itself, and many other things, in order also to 'not think' about anything. It does this not only in the sense that it *thinks* 'of nothing', but in order to *be* 'the thought of nothing'.

To keep this effect up, the poem's sentences must be constantly self-breaking and heterogeneous, not sequential and continuous; and it says so explicitly:

> The sentence in word build is additive
> but logic partitions the stream (p. 652)

The poem's sentences are 'additive', not logical; its words are always 'building' outwards, moving in a single line through things and ideas as if they were one substance. That substance is both 'more words' and What There Is, each extending each in an ever-receding horizon of association and potential meaning. As a further illustration, Blake's proverb of Hell, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*,

> The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.[48]

becomes, in *Kazoo Dreamboats*

[48] William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 37.

no char no riot the horses in lather of instruction by the turning
fire of the wheels

When viewed at longer-range, we see the imagery as the massive interpenetration of associative threads:

I saw this notion in full fiery
finesse, alive alive-o. Barter be barter bitten, either the other's
mine not not by violence water-rooted but in being what and despite
reason in self-nature, within continuous transient boundary layers
no char no riot the horses in lather of instruction by the turning
fire of the wheels. The saw-horse by the roadside part broken down
is here quite forgot (p. 651)

and so on. The integration of the Blake quotation is not limited to the overt – the horses – but includes many implied secondary and tertiary links along the associative chain. Behind the tygers of wrath is the tyger burning bright, and this comes into the poem along with the horses, not on its own, but to enliven a contrast with the 'water-rooted' oysters hocked through the streets – 'alive alive-o' from the Molly Malone ditty – in a cart pulled, no doubt, by horses (did Molly Malone have horses?). The living molluscs and the burning light of the tyger meet in the transient boundary layer, the associations blur together in a roiling churn, a wheel of fire. Pulled by horses, again. The process of unfurling seems indefinite. The effect is to suggest a huge porosity between the conceptual and the textual. The poem's ideas feel as solid as the textual connections and associations that abruptly come to mind, and the words we use to express those connections and associations: as solid as these, and as fleeting as these.

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If logic partitions the stream, then contradiction keeps it flowing by allowing for different and competing strands of meaning at once. The scraps and fragments of potential thoughts are not excluded. By this new process of sentence, we reach new a process of sentience. The mental detritus surrounding the making of statements is, the poem suggests, what is really there. But to see it requires the choosing, narrowing, excluding and sequencing instinct to subside into abeyance. Indeed, by staying this ordering impetus, all things, including nothing, can enter into what they really are: they meet, finally, their own names:

the void is not nameless but at its natural frequency (p. 649)

At least, that's the wish. And the poem seeks to sing this 'natural frequency'. But how to hear its music? On the kazoo. A toy-like wind instrument; it makes a shrill rubbishy sound, a tinnitus of unserious quailing. A dreamboat is a nostalgic fluff term: 50s PR-guff for screen heroes. So what there is must be powerfully connected to this kitsch and nostalgia, this rubbish and innocence. What is there is the unheard music of relentless *play*.

These are the markers of what's
there, what there is, by necessity in the field of self-play (p. 653)

Play is unsequenced sentience. It's what vivifies the fluff, the detritus of the whole. Junk, scraps, rubbish, nothing, emerge as a steady backdrop donating outline, and apportioning focus, to what there is. This preoccupation with the importance of what is cast off and thrown away has been a constant theme of Prynne's work, going back to *Kitchen Poems* of 1968, the first volume in his collected *Poems*, which frequently meditated on the relevance of rubbish and scrap and material disjecta as emblems of invisible influences, from genetics to the dead:

Fluff, grit, various
discarded bits & pieces: these are the
genetic patrons of our so-called condition.

[…]

Dust, objects of use
broken by wear, by simply slowing too much
to be retrieved as agents. Scrap; the
old ones, the dead who sit daily at the feast.
('A Gold Ring Called Reluctance')[49]

[49] *Poems*, pp. 21, 23.

In *Kazoo Dreamboats*, the 'dead' are as much the poets whose voices haunt its sentences; the scraps of their language are the matter for the poem's living thought. However, in *Brass* (1971) 'rubbish' exerts a force like sexual arousal:

> Rubbish is
> pertinent; essential; the
> most intricate presence in
> our entire culture; the
> ultimate sexual point of the whole place turned
> into a model question.
> ('L'Extase de M. Poher')[50]

Attention to rubbish, then, is a mode of tuning into a deeper reality, and an expansion of consciousness. In the earlier poems, this had a social and philosophical focus: such attention to the dross of earth draws us closer to the earth, and to our common being on it. In *Kazoo Dreamboats*, the 'rubbish' comes to infuse language itself though the multiplicity of its potential meanings flowing together; nothing has been excluded – and nothing has also been *included*. For in contradiction we experience the way that something can both be and not be; contradiction is the ongoing simultaneity, and bondedness, of is and isn't.

In this way the poem keeps its various contradictory scraps of thought circling the runway; but these, intermingling with each other, also exert through a powerful urgency and insistence through their networks of recurrence. They return like waves in subtly evolving patterns of repetition, like frequencies. The feel of the work, maturing slowly, develops through flashes of connection. These gather into powerful circuits of thought and image which receive a fresh charge of emphasis with each word, thought or image that contributes to the effect of recurrence. I will try to illustrate this by excerpts from the poem spanning several pages:

> We'll make folly in pledge to stem-division as
> decisive for cut to cut across narrows, passage throat offensive
> in try once only by defiance vectors (p. 639)

> Tongues perplexed by speech of fluid memory in knowledge self-

[50] *Poems*, p. 182.

made go for it and better be told, tolling this time be, it is
necessity in its own embracement (p. 646).

Joy so low at base count,
new-fertile as self cell to another sold on to give like fragrance
and volatile upon the air. The bearing point of love is joy its
dipole infusion in shreds of the shell lattice all along also along
its boundaries, all famous and there to be known, bright start in
motherhood relented (p. 646).

The nipple corridor by conductance of care origins com-
pletes the pair bonding expressed to the tongue before more than
murmur construes its answer: how, then can what is be going to be
in the future, coming to this? (p. 652).

These examples seem to present a contrast between organic imagery and scientific process, organised into a complex centred on birth. On the one hand there are throats, tongues, murmuring, nipples, joy, love and motherhood. On the other there is stem-division, base count, self cell, dipole infusion etc. The contrast suggests a tension between organic birth and motherhood experienced subjectively and the coolly scientific process of augmenting fertility. The suggestions are dim, but sufficient to hold each other. The tension seems to crystallise around the relation between our present and future, the mother and the child, we might say, in the final question 'how, then can what is be going to be | in the future, coming to this?' We might try and develop some kind of response to this; to analyse, construct, conclude. But the poem seems intent upon isolating the reader in the act of developing the links and connections that are the preliminary work of analysing and concluding; and since what we are feel when isolated in this way is our own minds making such connections, we remain present to the moment of each line, while also ready to connect it to what comes before, and what might come after. Thus the recurrence of certain words or image patterns forms a kind of pulse; and once the complex of terms and ideas is developed, words like 'nipple corridor' and 'care origins' act to reconfigure and extend the existing energy of thought; though it leads to no firm conclusions, it is vitally important that we feel that energy as it moves. That is how the poem makes the reader acutely aware that the movement of that energy comes *in* the reading as much as *from* the poem. Each connection in the imagery or diction dilates the network of recurrences to embrace further associations (passage throat, nipple corridor etc), until it begins to feel as if the poem is able to

connect and combine into one stream of thought almost anything that comes along, since almost anything suggests a prior connection. By this technique it becomes possible to hear not just those meanings, associations, and resonances in the immediate orbit of any particular line, but the whole texture of the poem. Prior moments bond to the present in a kind of rolling accrual. Perhaps this is one way in which the poem embodies its concerns for the relationship between 'what is' and 'what is going to be'. This is also the meaning of frequency: the whole reading takes place inside the abrupt contractions and dilations of connection.

The poem's rhythm of switches keeps the whole text alert to such recurrence. Its 'frequency' skeletalises the flux by firming up a clear and ample array of thoughts. With these in place, like so many axles, the work begins revolving at a speed to blur their outline, so that finally losing all boundedness they can interfuse as fluid energy. And this, flooding the text, makes it feel like something both intense and diffuse, concentric and inclusive; something like thinking itself, is happening. In this way, frequency engages contradiction in a polar bond: if contradiction allows us to experience the shared substance of thought and matter by included the detritus of both, and doing this all at once, then frequency spreads and diffuses that process so that it becomes intelligible, or audible, temporally, as a pulse.

The critic I. A. Richards is famous for the distinction that he draws in *Science and Poetry* between the kinds of statements made by science, and the pseudo-statements made by poetry. He offers some elaboration on the latter in *Practical Criticism*, where he considers:

> statements which are there for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake. Hence to challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention *as statements claiming truth*, is to mistake their function. The point is that many, if not most, of the statements in poetry are there *as a means* to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever.

However he adds an interesting dilemma:

> With narrative poetry there is little danger of any mistake arising, but with "philosophical" or meditative poetry there is great danger of a confusion[51]

[51] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment* (Myers Press, 2008), p. 180.

Kazoo Dreamboats wishes to keep the reader in 'great danger of a confusion', though Prynne would rename confusion as 'possibility'. Its thoughts, its statements, on contradiction and so on, are not primarily directed at arousing any particular feelings, other than the excitement of the possible. On the other hand, nor are they be taken as contributing to any body of doctrine. Rather the poem seeks to keep all its thoughts alive and throbbing in the realm of 'might be', which needs a little from both sides: *some* of the force of statements aimed at 'the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes', and *some* of the force of 'statements claiming truth'. The poem's inner giddiness is the result of combining the two, with each force enriching and charging the other. And it keeps the twofold nature of its statements continually vivid and active and pullulating, through the modulated recurrences of its frequency, its pulse.

This perhaps explains why it feels so enormous, and vast in its implications even though scarcely any of its sentences really 'mean' much. It is not the sentences that mean, although these have a function for generating a zonal urgency and energy, amplified by the switches, but the words, dis-located from what Prynne elsewhere terms the 'fully prudential working of syntax'.[52] The *impression* of sense is greatly increased, even as the meaning remains obscure. Because the words rely so much – through frequency – on the reader's audition and recall and capacity to link up the recurrences, they are only half-there, as it were: the poem is actively collaborating with the mind's readiness for the outbreak of pattern, and its inclination to be feelingly persuaded by the conflict and contrast between patterns.

This involves something like a version of Eliot's 'auditory imagination':

> What I call the 'auditory imagination' is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin

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[52] Prynne's letter to Ray Crump, 14th March 1968:

> you don't need the fully prudential working of syntax – words in their proper order and sequence – since you have each in its apt and truthful place. Shyness of this delicate nature is in the heart, not (overtly) on the page.

(*Certain Prose of the English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain, 2012), p. 183).

> and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. It works through meanings, certainly, or not without meanings in the ordinary sense, and fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the current, and the new and surprising, the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.[53]

The use of recurrent and modulating motifs in *Kazoo Dreamboats* does indeed seem to invigorate the words, bringing something back from the strange disjunctive kind noise they so often lapse into. And a feeling of things beginning and ending at once is a vital part of this. But one crucial aspect of Eliot's notion is missing: despite the references to early Greek philosophy there is little feeling of the ancient in *Kazoo Dreamboats*. The temporal horizon that lies behind Eliot's vision of the penetrating and fusing imagination is absent: we feel something crossing back and forth over a surface instead. Our hearing as it is specifically tuned by the poem, our auditory imagination, intuits the clashing of scales, between the quantum and the cosmic, being and non-being, over the flat plane of one vast *now*.

The feeling, or the experience, of frequency that we develop from the poem resembles what Empson says when parsing a couplet in Marvell's poem 'The Garden':

> Annihilating all that's made
> To a green thought in a green shade.[54]

The speaker, argues Empson, is 'either contemplating everything or shutting everything out.' He writes:

> This combines the idea of the conscious mind, including everything because understanding it, and that of the unconscious animal nature, including everything because in harmony with it. Evidently the object of such a fundamental contradiction (seen in the etymology: turning *ad nihil*, to nothing, and *to* a thought) is to deny its reality; the point is not that these two are essentially different but that they must cease to be different so far as either is to be known. So far as he has achieved his state of ecstasy he combines them, he is

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[53] T. S. Eliot, 'Matthew Arnold', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1964), pp. 118-9.

[54] Andrew Marvell, *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), p. 60.

> 'neither conscious nor not conscious,' like the seventh Buddhist state of enlightenment.[55]

Our awareness of the poem, our participation in establishing and enriching its patterns of recurrence and modulation, which combines so many different ideas at once also requires us not to move too far towards the reality or otherwise of any one idea. The effect of the overriding strength of the poem's frequency is to make us feel all its ideas as meaning something similar: to adapt Empson, the point is not that they are essentially different but that they must cease to be different so far as any of them are to be known. And that is because we 'know' them through the relentlessness of their interconnections. And these lead us to feel the poem transmits, through all its networks and patters, everything and nothing at once.

The imaginative engagement with the work consists then in engaging and investing these networks and patterns with further and ampler connections. That is the activity of sense-making. The abstraction inside this process, by aggregating the multiple resonances of words, comes to be felt as something very and firmly *real*. Perhaps this is all Prynne can really mean by 'What There Is': as an immersion in the thrilling and mind-expanding experience of abrupt mental vivaciousness, in which many possible and often contradictory meanings are held together in one vision. At the same time, the inherent incoherence of the poem means that its vision is also one that constantly borders on chaos.

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[55] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 120.

III
SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

The concept of nothing, and the word 'nothing', and whatever rich distance might lie between them, are vital elements in *Kazoo Dreamboats*. The poem says:

> This is and must be the thought of nothing that
> cannot be apart from what is, neither as or by cause, what it is
> to be, relentless and unsame (p. 640).

So 'nothing' is part of 'what it is | to be'; but the very boldness of the statement begs the question, 'what is the *This*?' Is it the poem itself, or the 'thought' disclosed by it? On the analysis I've pursued above, we are prevented from making such a distinction. The poem *is* a kind of thinking. If so, what role does 'nothing' play in that?

The word first appears in the third paragraph of the poem. We meet it here:

> Zero conductance makes little of nothing, little at all events
> as yet were, but nothing not so fast or in face bound transitive
> reversal displaced (p. 640).

Kazoo Dreamboats does indeed 'conduct' nothing, and will make much of nothing. With nothing 'bound' to its many jarring contrasts and contradictory maneuvers ('reversal displaced'), the word is also 'bound' in a different direction – somewhere more active and influential, where it becomes 'transitive'. But if it is 'bound transitive', where has it come from? The third iteration of 'nothing' in the paragraph offers a richer suggestiveness:

> Nothing shall come of continuous diminish
> but across its boundaries if they exist for sure everything is
> possible and can be computed, speak parrot and to discernibly
> good approximations (p. 640).

The poem makes two vital connections here. The first is with Shakespeare. We hear Lear's rebuke to Cordelia:

LEAR what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak.
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?
CORDELIA Nothing.
LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
(*The Tragedy of King Lear*, I. 1. 83-88)[56]

The second connection is a bond between 'nothing' and the exalted sense of potential being that animates the whole poem, which even the ironic bookends 'for sure...and can be computed' cannot cancel or diminish: 'everything is | possible'.

I propose the explore the first connection more deeply in order to shed light on the second. The reference to *Lear* is a highly pregnant moment in the poem, and the powerful role of the word 'nothing' in that play is channeled into *Kazoo Dreamboats* at this juncture. The questions I want to ask are: what is Prynne taking from *Lear* in his adaptation of Lear's 'nothing'; and what is he also leaving out? To do this, I will need to make a thorough examination of the use of 'nothing' in Shakespeare's play.

* * *

Shakespeare often keeps pressing at a single word throughout a play. He draws out its various meanings into a wide web of interconnections until the most humble reappearance of the word, whatever it is, suffices to set the whole linguistic construct throbbing with the resonance of earlier echoes. The word is 'honest' in *Othello*, 'pale' in *Richard II*, 'blood' in *Macbeth*. In *King Lear* the word is 'nothing'.[57] This is appropriate for a play in which we feel, by the end, against the tide of all our instincts, that it may really be better to be dead than alive. While Lear's

[56] All Shakespeare references are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and others, 3rd edn (New York: Norton, 2016).

[57] There is a large critical literature on *Lear* and the meaning of 'nothing' in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. For a shrewd analysis and survey, see for example, R. S. White, 'Making Something Out of 'Nothing' in Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Survey*, 66 (2013), 232-245. My narrow and selective approach to the topic is focused on exploring and developing the links with *Lear*, both explicit and implicit, established by *Kazoo Dreamboats* itself.

utterance 'Nothing will come of nothing' is a commonplace, it is nonetheless the most recognisable and richest use of the word in the language.

The various meanings for 'nothing' given in the OED (3rd edn) can be grouped under three headings – three great springs of significance – without losing the nuances and shadings that colour the distances between them. These are as follows:

(1) *Nothing* as simple or pure negation – 'no thing', 'not anything': a mostly but not exclusively grammatical function.
(2) *Nothing* as something worthless, trivial or unworthy of notice.
(3) *Nothing* as void, nothingness – mainly in the philosophical sense, but with mythical-religious connections to the primordial chaos of unshaped, unformed, undifferentiated matter. Where there is talk of creation *ex nihilo*, this is the *nihilo*.

Shakespeare seemed to be most fond of playing with its sense under (2) above. This is hardly surprising: 'something worthless, trivial and unworthy of notice' belongs to the social and political spheres of value and judgment in which his characters move and breathe. But the sense under (2) is also figurative: 'nothing' here is a metaphor, albeit a highly attenuated one, fashioned from the purely grammatical function of (1). Shakespeare's mind was drawn towards the metaphorical capacities of words; but 'nothing', perhaps more than most metaphors, determines and foregrounds its identity as a word – as a cipher or empty vessel capable of accruing subtle new shades and tones, as opposed to the more static usage as either grammatical function (1) or philosophical concept (3). As an idea, as a concept, 'nothing' had no interest for Shakespeare: he was interested in the word. And by subtly honing and combining the word's meanings under (1), (2) and (3) against and among themselves, he was able to realise the word's real fascination for him: and this was how one word – the epitome of humble insignificance – could suggest something far greater and more vivid, something nearly unimaginable which nevertheless seizes the imagination, since it simultaneously opened and obscured the very data that imagination could work on.

We can see Shakespeare at work in this subtle process of combining the different meanings under (1), (2) and (3) in *Othello*.

IAGO Ha! I like not that.
OTHELLO What dost thou say?

IAGO Nothing my lord, or if – I know not what.

OTHELLO Was not that Cassio parted from my wife?

IAGO Cassio, my lord? No, sure. I cannot think it
That he would steal away so guilty-like,
Seeing your coming.

(*Othello*, III. 3. 33-38)

Here he elides the senses of (1), bare denial, and (2), something worthless or trivial; at the same time this move opens a suggestive gap between the two, the very existence of which implies the potential for further enlargement. By this latent suggestive capacity he is able to transform the meaning of the word under (2) – something worthless and trivial, not worth knowing – into something like its opposite, 'something *very* significant, which it would do well not to know'. The word becomes almost grotesquely pregnant, and Othello is of course alive to it and demands full information. To the audience, the word has added sense of 'the beginning of the end, the first step on the road to disaster'. In this way the word blends the honest desire for the full facts with the more existential fear that reality will prove too much for us: it becomes a synecdoche for our temptation to discover truth at all costs, even if it might shatter our very faith in life. Shakespeare also manages to include, though obliquely, a connection to the sense under (3). Just as the audience might hear in it 'the beginning of the end', Iago's 'nothing' marks the first step towards the sundering the of bond, forged by love, between Othello and Desdemona, and between them and life itself. This, the play has earlier made clear, is the path to chaos:

OTHELLO Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul
But I do love thee; and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

(III. 3. 89-91)

Shakespeare found this pregnancy so attractive he repeated the trick in *Lear*:

GLOUCESTER What paper were you reading?

EDMUND Nothing, my lord.

GLOUCESTER No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.

(I. 2. 30-35)

As with Othello, so with Gloucester: 'nothing' is, at the same time, a trivial detail of no importance, *and* a hidden thing of dreadful significance, *and* the first step on the road to disaster. In *Lear* the path from 'nothing' to Othello's 'Chaos is come again' is made far more explicit. The play presents 'nothing' as the chaos at the heart of human life when the bonds of love, duty and obedience are cancelled and replaced by 'nothing', by mere appetite and will.

But before I come to that, I need to consider something of the shades brought through the word in other plays. In *Timon of Athens*, when we find Timon saying

TIMON My long sickness
Of health and living now begins to mend,
And nothing brings me all things.
(*The Life of Timon of Athens*, V. 2. 71-73)

we are to understand that, since to Timon everything is worthless, as per (2), having nothing makes him the possessor of everything of worth. Or we might understand that, being now entirely self-sufficient, he has everything he needs when he has nothing. Either way, the point is that the things of human life are worthless and that the only value in life lies in the stance a person takes in relation to that truth. This greatly expands the range of the meaning under (2) by opening up a relationship between 'nothing' and 'all', a strong polar tension captured in the idioms 'all or nothing', 'all for nothing', 'nothing at all'.

Indeed, what these idioms indicate is that the idea of 'all' is, in a sense, inherent in 'nothing', especially in its metaphorical usages. That fact seemed to exercise a fascination for poets. Donne exploits this relationship again and again:

On a round ball
A workeman that hath copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia
And quickly make that, which was nothing, *All*:
('A Valediction: Of Weeping')

She'is all States, and all Princes, I,

Nothing else is.
('The Sunne Rising')

All others, from all things, draw all that's good,
Life, soule, forme, spirit, whence they beeing have;
I, by loves limbecke, am the grave
Of all, that's nothing.
('A Nocturnall Upon S. Lucies Day')[58]

The great fascination of the word for Shakespeare seems to reside in the way that this little word, a byword for insignificance itself, possessed such suppleness that it could also stand in for everything. He deliberately heightens this connection between 'nothing' and 'all', and adds to it the sense of some final, terrible ungraspable truth, as if the word itself would fade out before such infinitely receding horizons could ever be pinned down. He sees in this word, or feels in it, a vast horizon which the imagination struggles to encompass. When, after *Lear*, Leontes wrangles with the word at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale*, we can feel a new sense of 'all' coming into view:

LEONTES Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh? – a note infallible
Of breaking honesty, – Horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? And all eyes
Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?
Why, then the world and all that's in't is nothing;
The covering sky is nothing; Bohemia nothing;
My wife is nothing; nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing.
(*The Winter's Tale*, 1. 2. 284-296)

[58] John Donne, *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), pp. 30, 11, 34.

By these frenzied repetitions the word is made into an emblem of chaos: the absurdity and disorder of a world melting into unmeaning as little things and large things become confused and insensibly interchangeable. We can also feel keenly how the vision of disorder implied in the connection between 'all' and 'nothing', the latter containing the former, flows from a weakening in the bonds of love and duty. *Lear* cuts this fraying thread completely.

If 'nothing' enacted confusion on the psychological plane in the deranged figure of Leontes, *Lear* does the same for the King himself while amplifying its impact on the political, national and existential planes. As one commentator has remarked, the word 'is a kind of vortex that draws the ordered world of King Lear downward, reducing Lear to nakedness and madness and Gloucester to blindness'.[59] The play illustrates on a broad canvas what Othello meant by 'Chaos is come again.' Albany gives us a precise image of that vision:

ALBANY If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come.
Humanity must perforce prey on itself
Like monsters of the deep.
(IV. 2. 46-50)

Replace loyalty, love and duty with 'nothing', and humans become beasts, creatures of arbitrary yet predatory appetites. In Lear's famous dictum, 'Unaccommodated man' – man stripped of the hierarchy of social and affective frameworks that support family and polity – is just 'a poor, bare forked animal' (III. 4. 97-98). Indeed the terror of the situation infuses the world of Lear so completely that even the gods are portrayed in similar terms:

GLOUCESTER As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods:
They kill us for their sport.
(IV. 1. 38-39)

[59] James L. Calderwood, 'Creative Uncreation in *King Lear*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986), 5-19 (p. 6).

Shakespeare's approach to 'nothing' in the play is to enact the connection between 'nothing' and 'chaos' by blending the senses of 'a dreadful truth you were better off not knowing' and 'the disaster we all dread', together with the original philosophical sense under (3) of a primordial unformed chaos. And by packing all these into the pregnant sense (2) of 'something trivial and insignificant' he manages to make us feel that, while we might well fear that at root we are nothing but murderous beasts, things may be even worse than that. If we return again to Edmund and Gloucester:

GLOUCESTER What paper were you reading?
EDMUND Nothing, my lord.

the word in its tragic pregnancy keeps us focused on the 'trivial' matter of the letter while putting our minds prospectively in contact with Albany's image of humans feeding on each other like 'monsters of the deep'. This is the essential purpose of the word in the play. Shakespeare reiterates 'nothing' to draw us close to the *word* as a simple but rich metaphor of denial while expanding its scope of implication to offer a perspective onto something far worse, a vast but vague horizon of something unimaginable, but also unimaginably awful.

In this way, the word acts as a kind of portal where opposites meet. In the example above, Edmund's 'nothing' mirrors Cordelia's while spreading the two into a relationship of mirrored contrast. Gloucester tells Edmund that 'The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself.' As another commentator has remarked, 'the "quality" of Edmund's "nothing" is the opposite of Cordelia's "nothing," for one is a disguise of villainy, the other a demonstration of honesty.'[60] Two different trajectories of meaning, yet the word remains identical.

Part of the foundation of the power of 'nothing' in *Lear* is that we struggle to imagine anything when we hear the word. Shakespeare adapts this difficulty for the play: what we might be struggling to imagine, he makes us feel, might actually be the very deepest truth about ourselves and about life. This puts us in contact with our deepest fears even as it blurs the precise image of our terror into the background. The play chills us by opening a gap between the word as a meaningless puff, and a terrible hint as its real meaning; by placing our captive imagination in the junction between the two, we feel both that 'nothing' might be the last,

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[60] Adrian Papahagi, 'Much Ado About "Nothing" in *King Lear*', *The Annals of Ovidius University Constanta: Philology Series*, Vol. XXVII (1|2016), 155-70 (p. 162).

dreadful word on reality, and also that reality is like the word – something 'trivial and insignificant'.

The chaos of creature feeding on creature lies behind nothing precisely because nothing is what the minds of Edmund and Iago see behind life. To them, ceremony, order, duty and obedience are threadbare costumes for the will, to be stripped away; and the tendency of their cynical, faithless minds is to keep stripping everything away until they encounter something as hard and solid as their own desires. When we hear Lear protest:

LEAR Oh, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest things superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's.
(II. 4. 259-262)

we might remember that Edmund had claimed that this 'nature' was his deity: 'Thou, Nature, art my goddess' (I. 2. 1). Worship of her means accepting that we are beasts driven by will and appetite. Let others prop up the hoary notions of faith and duty. To the strongest and shrewdest will go the spoils.

Edmund asks what there is in the universe, really, to impede any individual pursuing his will and appetites, and the answer comes: nothing. There is nothing to bind human to human, and thus nothing to bind us to what Timon identifies as the fundamental social, political and religious matrix of human life:

TIMON Piety and fear,
Religion to the gods, peace, justice, truth,
Domestic awe, night-rest and neighbourhood,
Instruction, manners, mysteries, and trades,
Degrees, observances, customs, and laws,
(*Timon of Athens*, IV. 1. 15-19)

The overall vision of *Lear* is really a large-scale magnification of the local perspective of the Iagos and Edmunds. It is as if Shakespeare is experimenting with this perspective, transfusing as much of it as possible into the world of this play, in order to test to breaking point the

integrity and truth of the things that might protect us from the chaos of competing wills – the faith of a Kent, the hope of an Edgar, and the love of a Cordelia.

Edmund's 'Nothing, my lord' is not only foreshadowed by Iago: it is an exact mirror of Cordelia's original response to Lear's demand for flattery:

LEAR what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.

Where Edmund leaves his 'nothing' deliberately open so as to suggest 'something alarming that you were better off not knowing', Cordelia's 'nothing' on the contrary has no pregnancy. At the same time it too points at something larger. Her 'nothing' stands for the unadorned self-evidence of the plain facts. These are not the plain facts of an Edmund, that we are 'nothing but' the agents of our own wills, and that all talk of loyalty, duty and piety before the gods is for the weak-minded and superstitious. Cordelia's 'nothing' marks the truth that the existence of love and duty is axiomatic and requires no rhetorical ornament to substantiate their reality.

Seen like this, in the one word 'nothing' we feel two fundamental views on reality being opposed and combined. We are all mere beasts below our self-serving harping on the virtues of love and piety; at the same time these things so self-evident that they speak for themselves: it is only when we abandon these virtues, when we abandon their self-sufficient reality, that we descend into the hell of blind, competing wills. Shakespeare pushes both to the limit without choosing one or the other. To Edmund, to see into the heart of things is to see nothing; it means seeing humans as mere creatures. Albany has warned us, and the play has dramatised, what happens when enough people like Edmund seize the reins of power and this view hardens into reality. But the play leaves it an open question as to whether this really is the case, or whether 'the chaos we all dread' is simply the disastrous consequence of failing to acknowledge the deeper reality of the bonds of love and duty and piety; a reality which underpins the outward shows of ceremony and hierarchy which are nevertheless often shams, as Lear's love auction is a sham.

The tension in the word embodies a profound ambivalence towards life, and the ambivalence is dramatised in Lear himself. When Lear hears Cordelia's 'nothing', of course, he doesn't hear in it the refusal to betray the plain fact of her love. He fails to catch any of her implication as to the self-evidence of her duty and obedience, and her refusal to bow to sham. Clearly, to Lear, these

things do not speak for themselves. He has something of Edmund's attitude to speech as a performance necessary to power, but without Edmund's cynical savviness. Edmund, like Iago, is far too aware of the artifice of language, language a tool for manipulation, to mistake the word for the thing itself; but this is exactly what Lear does. His attachment to the word, not the thing, is what undoes him quite.

With such an attitude, Cordelia's rebuke, her 'nothing' is inevitably a catastrophe to Lear: the poverty of her language summons some deeper and more terrible poverty of being, one that he will shortly experience. Cordelia has 'nothing' to say, simply because of her loyalty to the truth and substantiality of love: her 'nothing' rests atop the great 'something' that *does* exist. But in her word Lear hears a void within being itself. She has nothing to *say*; but he *becomes* nothing. It is his lot to experience first-hand the reality of his own approach to the word.

The Fool's words indeed connect these two things deliberately for Lear – being nothing and having nothing to say:

FOOL I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing. – Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue, so your face bids me, though you say nothing.
(I. 4. 162-164)

The Fool's wise and mocking 'thou are nothing' soon transforms into Lear's hideous, ecstatic 'thou art the thing itself' – in the hovel scene where 'nothing' and 'essential being' coincide in the vision of unaccommodated man. But Lear doesn't simply see this, he *becomes* the gaze that denies that man is anything but beast: he doesn't become, like Edgar, a 'forked animal', but inhabits the void he heard in Cordelia's words: the total denial of false shows. His previous grotesque attachment to the word 'nothing' is then transformed into another grotesque attachment, to 'the thing itself': 'Thou art the thing itself.' he cries (III. 4. 96-97). Indeed, in the hovel, he acts as a living Word among beastlike creatures – mere 'things'. The hovel scene dramatises almost all senses of 'nothing' explored in the play: man as a beast, one more worthless thing in a world of worthless things, and living in a state of chaos. It is only by the end, when both words and things matter nothing to Lear beside his attachment to Cordelia, that these senses are resolved for him into the true meaning of Cordelia's 'nothing'. As Sheerin has argued, 'while Lear's literal giving takes away one kind of sovereignty and makes him nothing, this nothingness in turn

offers another mode of sovereignty'.[61] Love is the new sovereignty that returns through this 'nothing'.

The question of whether our essential humanity, stripped of all trappings, consists of a kind of hyperrational beasthood, or whether our beastlike murderousness is a result of the failure to be truly human through acknowledging the absolute reality of the bonds that unite us, animates the play. It is not resolved – Shakespeare seems to have had his doubts, and expressed these doubts in 'nothing'.

In any case, Shakespeare manages to concentrate a number of intense contradictory feelings into this word. Much of the horror he expressed in the word played on the its capacity to minimise or deny something immediately at hand while suggesting something vast and terrible. In Lear, 'nothing' indicates a self-sufficient reality of love and duty which requires no linguistic gloss; that they are so real that there is, ultimately, nothing to say for or of them. It also suggests that the essence of life is a meaningless abyss which me must will fill, or cover over, with language.

* * *

The starting point of *Kazoo Dreamboats* is to assume that 'nothing' is little more than linguistic and conceptual dust on more significant structures of thought and utterance. As with Shakespeare, Prynne's begins with the word's bare grammatical function, its role in 'discourse'. The poem's play, he says, 'with words like *something* and *nothing* and *anything* is part of the way in which these representative abstract pronouns are constructed in discourse'. Using the word as a 'pronoun device', he makes it a platform for 'conjuring' a larger range of suggestion and possible 'options':

> it's not possible rigorously to ask what the relation between *nothing* and *anything* would be. They're just pronoun devices to handle certain options which are going to make reference to one thing rather than to another thing. This is a metaphysically playful series of conjurations with these words and the suggestions that they make.[62]

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[61] Brian Sheerin, 'Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignties of "King Lear"', *Studies in Philology*, 110:4 (2013), 789-811 (p. 811).

[62] Dolven and Kotin, p. 202.

To make the word metaphysically active, or transitive: this is the poem's aim – to make it a hub for generating and channeling conjurations and suggestions. We can see the way it does this by its approach to idioms:

> I saw it utmost, to know partly is by now
> not to unknow else with borrowed light induced by origin perpetual,
> by passion flat lying and tumid for advantage, for all or nothing
> is the play sequence left over (p. 640).

The 'play sequence' (a metaphysically playful series of conjurations? the five acts of *Lear*?) is something left over, a residue of excluded detritus, dedicated to 'all or nothing'. On the one hand, the dedication is to an arid colloquialism, a cliché hollowed of content, a mere scrap of language. On the other hand, the poem evinces a serious metaphysical commitment to 'nothing', show how we may 'know it partly', which in keeping with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and the observation of subatomic quanta that informs the poem, is 'not to unknow'. And by focusing on hackneyed phrases in which 'nothing' is present but almost inaudible, the poem suggests that its very insignificance, its valueless (like Shakespeare's trivialising little 'Nothing, my lord' that causes so much trouble) is what makes it eminent. The poem's 'play sequence', occupying itself with scraps and trivia, acknowledges the banality of 'all or nothing' while subtly realising the dormant philosophical potential of their relationship; the full latent power of 'all' and 'nothing' rise up from suspension within the idiom, throwing up the possibility that they might be real equivalents, real poles in a rich tension; pay attention to what 'nothing' is, it suggests, and we might unlock everything. It moves between, and connects, the 'borrowed light' of the platitude with the 'origin perpetual' of nothing as the constitutive metaphysical condition of non-being. In the process, 'nothing' emerges into our attention, attracting its energy, activating further our concentration, while also exerting force into the poem as a whole.

We can see this approach at various places. The poem plays with the pat phrases 'nothing else', 'means nothing', 'nothing at all', 'nothing is simple', 'worth nothing':

> Close to uttered void, unity
> in nothing, else (p. 646).

> joy in

action on side the stuff of hit and miss no chance lost but by
necessity of its shadow culminant to not say by knowing is to be
aside with not for not, axial and suffused means nothing for I
had nothing at all so in such sense contended (p. 656).

Who's to say a lot more there in this field
where will bondage tremble and damage hunt down its course
in nature to address and rid for simple is nothing is for simple
grinding-up of promise-words (p. 657)

Driven thus walnut whirl dance portal, veer in to
now know this field untreated and untilled, is nothing worth
as proportional to counterpart vector (p. 657)

The logical reversal characterises the approach here: 'simple is nothing', 'is nothing worth'. This rhetorical maneuver is at once a microcosm of the playful and self-contradictory cross-logic of the poem and an attempt to raise the status of 'nothing' from mere word to active and real force; and this duality is central to the poem's 'thought' – its 'thought of nothing'. In all of these phrases 'nothing' becomes a protagonist. And such little internal pivots, 'moments in transit' which compose the 'substance' of the work, allow us to catch a glimpse, through the portal of contradiction, the reality of 'nothing'. In one of its many teasing self-references, the poem says: 'At surface scrap all of its hot cluttered void' (p. 654). The oxymoronic image of the 'cluttered void' is crucial to understanding the reality – the 'force' – of 'nothing' in the poem. Prynne wants to say that 'nothing' is not just empty, not just void: the 'state of not being anything', the poem says, 'is reserved for nothing, heavily in | occupation' (p. 652). So he wants 'nothing' to be both full *and* empty – a strong active force in the dialectic of being and non-being, *and* the vacuum, nothingness, the void proper. But he is also at pains to avoid the temptation to allow nothing's 'fullness' or active force cancel out its proper identity as void: that would be to redeem 'nothing' for *us*; to bring 'nothing' back within an exclusively human sphere, where it doesn't belong. Indeed to do so would be to anthropomorphise the notion along human scales and values. The force of 'nothing', its power of negation, acts on a very distant plane to the human one. As the poem says, 'The internal origin of matter | is the negation of its force for proximity' (p. 654). A 'force for proximity', whatever else it might suggest, evokes the gravitational power of attraction; it also suggests a proximity to human being, which seems to have no proper or discernible relationship to the dialectics of being and non-being that concerns the poem. The

point seems deliberate. Though gravity attracts matter towards the earth, the internal origin of matter repels any claims of human relation: indeed the origin *is* the negation of such proximity, a countermanding of the force that brings things to into relation with us, or the force that we ambitiously or hopefully exert. Matter, or nature, is not part of us. It is sovereign. It is alien. It is its own thing. Its being is non-conscious and profoundly inhuman; its being is bonded with non-being. Any claim to feel spiritually connected or at one with it is either deluded hubris or a cover for the desire to dominate, extract, exploit, reduce, tally up, hive off, compute, destroy. To bring matter down to our scale, and to subject it to such processes, the poem asserts, is ultimately to make it the accessory to an 'astrolabe necrology of murder drones' (p. 654).

So to 'redeem' nothing to the human scale, to prioritise its positive and active aspect, would be to betray what 'nothing' is; since whatever it is, is also what it is *not*; and contradiction at that level is not something human thought and human speech can readily tangle with. We can see Prynne's anxiety over avoiding this trap, that of *saying* what nothing *is*, in the poem's relentless self-contradictions. Indeed this is precisely how 'nothing' exerts its 'force' throughout the poem; its relentless power of negation keeps pushing the language further and further along the tortured recessive byways of a self-qualifying and self-antagonising phrasing:

> By what cannot be said the overjoy of being so
> will romp home, bacteria scraped off from words even stupidity
> unrecognised. Is contradiction a joy *ex post facto* and this only,
> or by negation restored and reprieved, is being its own joy re-
> gardless, by omitted transfer's omission? In the field it self?
> And would that not need to be anywhere true as also not-true but
> not untrue? And also not to be needed or not, the wanting parts
> in scant otherhood (p. 655).

The first three sentences enact an impassioned questioning. They evoke a human mind engaging seriously with the premises of the poem. Can there be joy – as perhaps the deepest human engagement with the world – in contradiction? Is being its own joy – and if so how can there be any human feeling for the depth of life in negation and non-being? We go along with this since it articulates our own doubts. Then the final two sentences stifle this momentum under a lump of chop-logic doggerel. But this is just Prynne being consistent, demonstrating the reality of the matter under scrutiny. Prynne does not stop at questioning the role of negation, he moves us onto the plane of negation itself, where the sympathetic thrust of inquiry

is cut and diced into insensible chunks of double-negative verbiage by the blade-action of 'not', until all that's left is groundless, floating oxymoronic fragments: 'the wanting parts | in scant otherhood'. The clear and concrete questioning voice is split and negatived away into abstract nothingness.

This is how the poem stays 'Close to uttered void' and maintains its 'unity | in nothing, else' (p. 646). Though 'nothing' is not mentioned in the passage above, we can feel its influence and force throughout in the relentless movement towards self-negation. Though 'nothing' is not there, it is still there; though it is unuttered, its force directs the utterance. The bare grammatical function of 'nothing', as the negativing of 'something', thus runs amok, quite deliberately, though the whole poem.

Everything, Prynne seems to be saying, is also full of nothing, though nothing remains empty:

> If the nothing that is has field boundaries as
> non-infinite then spectral inductance cannot be zero; or if
> infinite then exclusively by imaginary separation adjusted as
> possible to go there and be in thought's realm full of emptiness
> as a jug from which water is or has been poured, not in time only
> but by logic of regularity as, is the inside space jug-shaped
> whether full or empty, in habit water or non-water (p. 650)

Here, 'in thought's realm full of emptiness', we find non-infinite/infinite nothing; an emptiness which is also a space that can be occupied, like the inside of a jug, and which exists irrespective of whether the jug is full or empty (it is 'possible to go there' in thought), but which also *occupies*: the space fills the jug. Whether 'nothing' is infinite or non-infinite doesn't matter for the purposes of the poem; what matters is it 'inducts' nothing both into zero and in a filling act of imagination, an 'imaginary separation' – though the act is characteristically an act of negation, and 'imaginary' might equally mean 'not real'.

But the most important element of the passage above is one I haven't mentioned yet. This is the reference to 'the nothing that is'. At first we might hear 'The Snow Man' by Wallace Stevens:

> For the listener, who listens in the snow,
> And, nothing himself, beholds

> Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.[63]

For Stevens, it is very hard for a human not to see and hear human being reflected in nature. To hear the wind and 'not to think | Of any misery in the sound of the wind,' would require a 'mind of winter': not a human mind. For Prynne, nature, or matter, actively repudiates the human. Being, the true 'is' (also the 'is-not') of What There Is, is not amenable to 'sense': it shares no real boundary or contact with either human meaning ('in this sense', or the 'sense of life') or human bodily perception, (the senses) – though there is some kinship with 'thought' where it is freed from a thinker, as Prynne explains in the essay 'Poetic Thought'. In *Kazoo Dreamboats*, being is 'being molecular and subvoiced, no sense in it or to it, | partition purified by dirt' (p. 646). The gaps in 'sense', the partition between the scales of our speech-dependent human being and inaudible ('subvoiced') molecular life, is both crammed and clarified with earth. Molecules, the poem suggests, are the 'senses' of the earth, and the earth, composed symphonically of all its molecules, is one of the voices of the universe; and that voice is not a human voice, and does not address us. Prynne overlays Stevens' 'mind of winter' with 'the thought of nothing'. This, in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, is the 'Nothing that is not there': the universe shares 'nothing' with human being. But knowing this, understanding this, is how we might behold the 'nothing that is'.

Making this 'is' real and *felt*, enacting it, is one of the key aims of *Kazoo Dreamboats*. The whole poem turns on it. The 'is' occurs in the force of the poem's dynamic self-negational choreography, as we've seen. But the work depends on its 'is' in another way. For once we admit the 'is', then, the poem argues, everything becomes possible; and this poem is a poem whose entire existence is predicated upon possibility, upon its *potential* meaning, on what life and thought and being might *possibly* be, since contradiction – the unifying principle of thought and matter – holds in coexistence (or co-nonexistence) all manner of competing possibilities without settling on one or the other'. This is why Prynne argues Parmenides and those who followed him into and out of the poem so strenuously:

> 'there is no place void of being, for the void is nothing; but
> that which is nothing could not exist; so then being is not moved;
> it is impossible for it to go anywhere, if there is no void' (p. 649).

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[63] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (Library of America, 1997), p. 8.

Thus the poem quotes Melissos, disciple of Parmenides. But Prynne wants to argue that, on the contrary, nature adores a vacuum. If there is no void, being cannot be moved – so let us have the void, since What There Is needs it, being like the poem itself, always moving, always changing, 'relentless and unsame'. Thus Prynne retorts:

> And
> by the line of correction if the void is nothing, is nothing what
> by self-likeness the void is and so by necessity to have this field
> of being; and is it full or empty or changing through time and if
> hardly can be spoken of this as what also is, must that also set
> limit to thought itself and is the limit finite or would be. If
> the void does not exist it must be full of non-existence, out to
> the brim which must exist in its location since not all is void,
> thus it is the void is not nameless but at its natural frequency
> else generic within limitless non-existence it could not be named
> into its proper non-being (p. 649).

Thank goodness that's cleared up. But the concern with naming something that 'hardly can be spoken of' is important. The limits of thought and the limits of language and the limits of being are continually put at issue in the poem, just as they are at issue for Parmenides and Melissos. For the latter, being contains everything; there can be no space for non-being, and certainly no radical dialectic between being and non-being. Everything that can be thought and named *is*, and is already and forever, while the void, by definition, is something that is *not*. This is so because, since the void is not, being cannot be moved or altered, and therefore must contain everything. However, on this account the paradoxical fact that we have a name for the void, a thing that is not, suggests that language, at least under this tangled contradictory light, may somehow exceed thought. And it seems that the tortured language of this passage enacts this very surplus capacity of language, even as it seeks to translate the capacity of language into a capacity of thought, and thus, of being. Prynne's language here attempts to drag thought onto the plane of the oxymoron and thus convert rhetoric into the real; since the plane of the oxymoron is a plane where anything is possible; where contraries are so powerful that one eclipses the other, only to be eclipsed in turn; where not to exist is not 'not to be', but to be 'full of non-existence'. On this plane, logic does not operate on a level ground of symmetrical equivalents, so reversing it does not produce equal results. Although the void might be 'nothing', and 'nothing' the void, 'nothing' is also *more* than the void; it has the void's 'field of

being' but is also 'what also is': ie, nothing is not just 'the void', it is the void that *is*. And if, as such, it sets the limits to thought, then these limits are also unlimited, since such limits depend upon the old void, the void that *is not*. This is how our attention to 'nothing' can unlock 'everything': 'everything' becomes possible, since every *thought* becomes possible, with this approach to 'nothing'.

The poem goes on to demonstrate this tortured, elliptical logic as something that coheres in flashes of negation. There is a difference between 'not' in the sense of a bare negative, an absence, and the active and strongly influential *is* of non-being in its dialectic with being:

> the not-song is from not-being and not merely not
> there nor not-possible nor silentness falling rapt upon attentive
> deaf ears (p. 649).

This 'not-song' is not silent at all. And it makes us hear in its 'nothing' many things. We hear insignificant 'nothings' rising into strong meaning from the scraps of cliché ('surface scrap...hot cluttered void'); while feeling the 'force' exerted by nothing as negation, we hear the 'nothing' of the philosophers, 'nothing' as the void of non-being setting the limits to thought and being; and we hear the scientific postulate of the vacuum or void, full or empty with fluctuating quanta within its field. The poem blends all of these things together, so that when it says 'nothing' once, we can hear all the other meanings in close orbit (conjurations, suggestions) impinging on the word. We might even hear the linking echo between 'hot cluttered void' and 'Close to uttered void': to utter 'nothing' is to usher in, all at once, the rich clutter of its manifold senses, since 'nothing' contains so much while also being 'full of non-existence'.

Nothing as negation, nothing as something worthless and insignificant, negation as vacuum and nothing as the concept of nothingness: the word is extremely plastic in the poem's hands. The poem blends and modulates the various senses of 'nothing' by stretching the word to cover more meanings, and then reincorporating those extended meanings back into the word; it does so because it wishes to blend and elide speculative philosophical ideation and experimental knowledge of the vacuum in one vision, a new dialectical reality in which nothing and being transform each other. Taken up into the flux, and acting as cause of it, 'nothing' is transformed from a strut of platitude into a critical part of the physical fabric of the universe ('what is and what is not conclude the molecular universe' (p. 653)). For 'nothing' to play a part in this radical dialectic, it must have a name, even while it must remain nothing. As the poem states:

the void is not nameless but at its natural frequency (p. 649)

In a sense, the *frequency* of its recurrence throughout the poem, blending and modulating meanings, *is* its name: it is 'relentless and unsame' (p 640). As 'nothing' sheds its identity as an inaudible unit of colloquial phrasing, it is reborn dynamically as an active force in a radical conceptuality in which idea and thing and name dance around each other. Being able to name a thing brings it into being, but just as being must include not-being and establish itself in a polar embrace, so language and naming must include, in a sense, what isn't part of the sentence – the excluded elements left out of the finished line. The frequency of 'nothing' becomes a means of including what cannot be named directly, and what cannot *be* directly. And the frequent iteration of the word, its frequency, is the way it is *named*, and thus kept 'in being' as something real, as a kind of charge or living energy animating the strange disjunctive ideational zone that the poem presents.

So, like Shakespeare, Prynne wants to bring some vigour to 'nothing'. Just as 'nothing' is the cold note solemnly gonging through the heart of *Lear*, Prynne wants 'nothing' for a baseline of iterative energy: to set its current flowing into and out of the lines, to illuminate the whole poem with the strong surprise of its oxymoronic light. Both authors stack several meanings into the one word, carefully blending them so that one sense subtly suggests others behind it, with their relationship enriching all. Both play with the ambivalent balance between fullness and emptiness that they see as inherent in the word. But where Shakespeare sought to create and emphasise the irresolvable tension between the meanings of nothing – on the one hand standing for the chaos in which humans shed their humanity and descend into beasts, and on the other for the self-evident reality of the ideals of human virtue – Prynne seeks to emphasise their compatibility. For Prynne it is a matter of dissolving the boundaries between the different classes of meaning, so each blends and enriches each. Because what he seeking is always *more* – more conjurations, more suggestions; or rather the same or similar suggestions in endlessly reworked formulations that adapt themselves to more and more material in continuously varying contexts. For Prynne, 'nothing' is a prime counter in the great play of possibilities, an instrument for generating potential meanings, which supply the energy of seemingly limitless increments that underpin the great abstract expanse of the poem's 'thought'. Shakespeare, by contrast, wants to concentrate the meanings of 'nothing': by concentrating he expands. He plays on the hard-to-imagine quality of the word, its *unimaginablility*, to create an unimaginable image; unimaginable both because it seems to exceed our imagination's grasp, and because it realises

our worst fears. The word's great potential, for Shakespeare, lay in fusing those two aspects as dramatic poetry. At the same time, its ambivalence was so rich that it could also stand, in Cordelia's 'nothing', in confirmation of our deepest, most hopeful intuitions towards life. Her 'nothing' is simply the truth that hearts are more ponderous, heavier with the burden of truth, than tongues.

Between Shakespeare and Prynne stands the issue of emotion: which is also the issue of humanity. In *Lear* 'nothing' is rich and ambivalent because it bears such enormous emotional forces; it can do so because they attach to the word from opposite sources, terror and hope, and because their force is the same. The charge of each cancels the other: that is why the word is so uncannily level and poised in its iterations in *Lear*. But in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, there is no emotional charge to any of the meanings of 'nothing'. There can be no ambivalence because there is no variation in the quality of emotion attaching to them; no emotion attaches to them. All the meanings of nothing coincide without tension. They do not take up positions in contrast. They all follow each other in one line of iteration. So the poem's 'nothings' don't bring into view a horizon of thought and feeling about *life* in the way Shakespeare's 'nothing' does. The word is a recurring blip on the poem's radar, a pulsing note. *Kazoo Dreamboats* reworks the pat phrases involving 'nothing' rather mechanically, it never infuses the word with any metaphorical pregnancy in doing so. The structure of the poem is geared towards one aim, which it repeats and modulates: to transform 'nothing' from a static and passive idea, into an active and dynamic one; to make the word a 'subject' with its own predicate; in Prynne's terms, a kind of 'pronoun device'. Stressing the idea as a *word*, again and again, much as Shakespeare did, *Kazoo Dreamboats* gives the word a thousand bodies, but they are all tasked with performing the same action. Where Shakespeare was concerned to blend the word's residue of grammatical functionality with its latent capacity to suggest the background to existence with the aim of forging an ambiguous *image*, *Kazoo Dreamboats* seeks to transform the word from such a residue into a *verb*, literally a present participle. This verb, while strongly active, completes no action: it pulses; and its pulse charges the poem with the power of thought, the power of its possibility. Nevertheless, as possibility it leads nowhere; or nowhere except towards more thought.

There is none of Shakespeare's horror of 'nothing'. Because his was a horror of the human chaos of savage and pitiless competing wills. But *Kazoo Dreamboats* has none of this horror because it has no 'chaos': chaos is something that exists to the human mind, and the poem has excluded human life from its 'thought'. Here lies the fundamental difference with Shakespeare. There is no chaos for Prynne. Chaos is simply a construct of the human psyche: do without psyche and you

do without chaos. Or rather, chaos is revealed to be simply the nature of the universe with human life displaced from any claim to intrinsic centrality in it. So 'nothing' cannot mean 'chaos': in the dialectic of being and non-being there is little room for the small matter of actual human lives. While that dialectic is intelligible, it is intelligible in contradiction, something incompatible with ordered human thought and certainly with ordered human life. For the same reason that there is no chaos in Prynne's 'nothing', there is none of Cordelia's 'Love, and be silent.' The bonds of love and affection between persons are necessarily absent from 'the molecular universe' with which the poem is largely concerned. Where Cordelia talks of her 'bond', her duty in gratitude and love, *Kazoo Dreamboats* can only talk of 'covalent bonding'.

This is not to say that the poem is entirely unconcerned with human affairs. It is – fleetingly. And this seems to be the point. None of its attachments of concern and compassion, the pangs of its poetic 'conscience', can endure in the turbulence of its flux. They are swallowed up and gone. Sometimes they recur, like 'nothing', in a kind of frequency, but such intermitted iteration seems to work better for thoughts and abstractions than they do with the coarser grains of human existence. The poem is forever blurring whatever is living and concrete into something conceptual and abstract. People, human life, simply become part of an argument:

> Strike at the price in the field do men buy it for a song or
> nothing less than entire, forever greedy the downside of simple
> nothing poverty and displacement close to starvation. No dream
> all hunger in the mouth get the fuck out of joy and beauty come on
> be direct for a change truth to tell not even war but abject misery
> the nothing to not have not eat, feel your mouth lost for words
> and minimum fluid intake (pp. 656-657).

This is one of the rare moments when 'nothing' emerges from 'discourse' into the social realm ('constructed in discourse' was Prynne's description). Here 'nothing' is the 'having nothing' of the indigent and starving. And yet just as quickly as it appears, whatever human reality these words might enfold sinks back into 'discourse'. There are references to poverty but these elide with frictionless, abstracted railing, like Lear at the tempest: 'get the fuck out of joy and beauty'. Its compassion, like its thought, is abstract; it simply uses the *language* of compassion. As if to reinforce the point, the poem's next move is to turn towards itself in ironic mocking of the author – 'come on | be direct for a change'. The poem's commitment to being 'relentless and

unsame' means it cannot avoid such turns, it must be always reappearing to itself, and cannot avoid transforming 'abject misery' into mere words in its own mouth.

Like the activity of electrons, 'nothing' may indeed exist as part of the material universe, but its sphere of being is separated from the immediate sphere of any particular person's being by such a vast distance that the ultimate question of its reality (its active possibility) becomes moot; moot but interesting. It is a riskless postulation, but suggestive and rich. Where Lear's experience of living out the Fool's verdict 'thou art nothing' involved a fearful period of residence in the gap between word and thing ('Who is it that can tell me who I am?' cries Lear (I. 4. 199)), in *Kazoo Dreamboats* this space is the site of a new kind of freedom: a freedom from the exclusions and boundaries set on language and reality by the conventional or colloquial understanding of nothing ('it's nothing, love'). This freedom is worth bearing in mind when we return to the lines adapting Lear's words:

> Relent
> will the property inherent starkly, by presumed necessity right
> at the peak there, princes of gorgeous folly stand all around,
> with their inhalers. Nothing shall come of continuous diminish
> but across its boundaries if they exist for sure everything is
> possible and can be computed, speak parrot and to discernibly
> good approximations (p. 640)

I've included the previous sentence as it carries a dim dramatic echo of *Lear* that foreshadows the citation. In dividing his kingdom, Lear executes his own 'will' *in vivo*, conferring his 'property' on his daughters. At the same time 'property inherent' implies a self-sufficient philosophical attribute, which might suggest Cordelia's 'love', which stands forth 'starkly' in her 'nothing', though the value of that 'property' falls just as starkly in Lear's mind (as he tells Burgundy: 'her price is fallen' (I. 1. 197)). (And hearing that, we might even hear an echo of Kent's exhortation for Lear to 'relent' in his stubborn 'will' to banish her). A more coherent, though eccentric image emerges in that of the mountain: 'right | at the peak there'; with the 'princes of gorgeous folly' standing around at the summit like exhausted mountaineers, each clutching at a breathing apparatus, 'with their inhalers'. Blending this with *Lear*, the breathless mountaineers at the peak (the King's fit of pique?) resemble the retinue of princes vying for Cordelia's hand, Regan and Gonerill in 'gorgeous' attire (as Lear tells them later: 'If only to go warm were gorgeous, | Why, nature needs not what thou gorgeous wear'st' (II. 4. 263-264);

presumably it's cold at the peak), with the King's 'folly' in banishing Cordelia in the foreground, and the Fool in the background. These stand around at the peak or summit of society; and Lear's command to Cordelia to 'Speak again' after she offers 'nothing' to his demand for the shows of love, comes 'from the top' ('people with top pay are rubbish, | everyone knows this, it's a law of nature.' says the poem (p. 655); Lear would be one of these).

At the same time, the mountaintop is a place of revelation; a place where we can 'See better', in Kent's words. And this place, so unfitted for humans that they can hardly breathe there, offers views over the earth where the self-evident majesty of nature equally reveals the absence of people. And perhaps this supplies the context for 'continuous diminish' in the next sentence. The great majestic spaces, the majestic emptiness, discernible at the peak, diminishes the human scale. Nature, at the scale of the mountain, dwarfs the human. Such disproportion of relation operates equally as the scale of the particle. This is the kind of distance the poem is concerned with; one that displaces and relegates human life, so that nature, as matter, may stand for itself. The diminishment is continuous just as the view from the peak extends to the limit of vision, and the fluctuations of the electromagnetic field is indefinite though unseen. From this distance, and emptiness, this absence of the human, 'nothing' shall *come*. Nothing, not the human, is the protagonist in the poem's 'play'.

In Lear's formulation, the commonplace 'nothing will come of nothing', 'nothing' is inert and ungenerative. The void is pure unmoving stasis; nothing comes from it or of it. Only God can act on this void. But *Kazoo Dreamboats* explicitly debars such intervention from a transcendent outside. There is no communicating flow between immanence and transcendence in spirit. Spirit, far from being a separate sphere coterminous with the mundane sphere, is locked inside matter:

> Spirit a sub-department in the store of
> material, add-on premium addict, grist to mills of working plant life
> expectancy (p. 652)

The 'elevation of spirit' that Prynne spoke of a being central to Wordsworth's vision is here bathetically relegated to 'material', a resource to be hoarded and exploited ('grist to mills'), or simply a lower denomination of 'matter'. In either case, the way is down: from the peak to the basement.

The poem also addresses that other power to act on 'nothing': the power of speech. Lear's 'Speak again' is a summons to Cordelia to bring something from her 'nothing'. But *Kazoo Dreamboats* transmutes this call into 'speak parrot'. While this evokes Lear wanting Cordelia to parrot her sisters, it suggests there can be no meaningful connection between human speech and the poem's conception of 'nothing'. The two exists on mutually exclusive planes. To 'nothing' all speech is senseless gibberish; to address it in this way can only yield the ironic harvest of 'discernibly | good approximations.' And the reference to John Skelton's satire on language learning, 'Speke, Parrot' only reinforces the fact. To attempt to speak the language of nature, to assume some power over it, or indeed some expressible kinship such as Wordsworth felt so deeply, is absurdity and folly. It is be a clever parrot, witlessly 'computing' what it sees and hears, in a dreary self-mimicry that understands nothing, no truth, only 'approximations'.

We can hear one such 'approximation' in the ironic commentary 'if they exist for sure'. This is the clever parrot reacting to the vast vista of 'the nothing that is', across whose boundaries 'everything | is possible'. Purves glosses the whole passage as follows

> Prynne adapts Lear ("Nothing shall come of continuous diminish") to suggest ... that a limit of nothingness might eventually be attained and, more convincingly, to suggest that that such a limit could never be attained, since the nothingness the poem has in mind does not function as some super-diminutive vanishing point or the result of a deficiency of perception[64]

Purves's 'more convincingly' sounds odd at first, but reflects an accurate insight into how the poem's tone weighs the scales in favour of limitlessness and possibility. He is right to assert that the poem sees in 'nothing' much more than a 'vanishing point' or 'deficiency of perception'; but the poem hardly needed the line from *Lear* to make that case. What the engagement with Lear does is to stress how the poem's idea of 'nothing' involves displacing the 'sovereign' human voice from centre stage in the great play of nature. The human voice enjoys no kinship with, let alone lordship over nature. The poem's vision of nature, a dialectic of being and non-being where contradiction operates at the level of the material substrate, makes a mockery of such claims. How could there be a sovereign human voice in the 'not-song' of the 'molecular universe'?

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[64] Purves, p. 149.

MacKay, commenting on the same passage, queries the reference to 'boundaries': 'Is this the boundary between the observable and the invisible, distinguishing that which is measurable from that which is not, let alone between the invisible and the inconceivable?'[65] Though I'm not sure about the distinctness of his distinctions (observable/invisible, what is measurable/what is not, invisible/inconceivable) the point he raises is a salient one, which is the incompatibility of different planes of being. What There Is, the poem keeps saying, does not depend upon our *is*. What *we* do is observe, measure, conceive; we can't help it. That does not yield nature. Contradiction operates to render moot any dichotomy between what is observable and what is invisible. In any case, the activity of subatomic particles is observable *and* invisible. With contradiction, what is 'true' is 'also not-true but | not untrue'. What we measure is just the measurable; the unmeasurable still exists. While we might conceive, as Edmund's mother did, the inconceivable still exists, and is tremendously powerful, as Shakespeare showed, in 'nothing'. Thus whether the boundaries of 'nothing' exist is ultimately unimportant, as the ironic commentary wryly indicates: if both sides of the boundary are included, if *not-is* bonds to *is*, then the existence of limits take on the equivalent role of a bare grammatical function. The new grammar of is and not-is, of nothing and everything together, is not one we can 'speak'; while it may be a 'thought', as the poem calls itself ('this is the thought of nothing'), it is not a human thought.

[65] Duncan MacKay, 'Open & Active Uncertainty: J. H. Prynne's Kazoo Dreamboats and the physics of an indeterminate reality', *Journal of Literature and Science*, 12:1 (2019), 59–76 (p. 70).

IV
CONTESTING RHYTHMS

I've argued that Prynne removes the imaginative notion of 'chaos' from his notion of 'nothing'. At the same time a real sense of chaos does pervade the poem: we feel it in the turmoil of its endlessly self-rupturing rhythm and syntax. Its language treads the brink between meaningful sound and meaningless noise, fading in and out over that boundary. And the relentless jarring, cutting, twisting, leaping and lumping of its sentences seem designed to keep us suspended at that threshold.

The active contact with noise, which we hear when the poem lapses into disconnected, semantically inert, unthinking verbiage, is something we also *feel* because the effect is continuously heighted through the poem's rhythm. Or rhythms. For the open form of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, with long-prose-like lines *and* enjambment, allows for a number of different, often strongly contrasting temporal signatures to operate at once; and Prynne exploits this feature of the form to perform a kind of contest between them. The contest seems so pronounced that it's worth investigating more fully. Particularly since it is through that contest that we feel each rhythm not only wrangling with the other – each alerts us to its opposite when the shifts occur between them – but also because the contest supplies the sense that each generates the other, and this generative force in turn generates much of the 'energy' of the poem.

I want to isolate what I see as the two most important rhythmic frequencies. Here is an example of the first:

> I saw these gaps of explanation rolling like wheels contrary within themselves, alien motions on fire with coriolis demeanour. I saw the grains self-rotate in their own amazement with noise of spheres metallic and burnished, along the baseline it is by amount at principle neither so nor not because contradiction is inherent and not alternate in sense ordering. I saw this notion in full fiery finesse, alive alive-o (p. 651).

This rhythm opens up brief clearings in the poem's overall flux. The temporal habitat is rich and nebulous, full of round pauses, lucid to its own resonance. Instances of this rhythm, which we could call 'light', often combine a number of important features: a kind of strange, abstract

figuration (‘gaps of explanation rolling like wheels’), a rolling cadence (‘alien motions on fire with coriolis demeanour’) and prosaic statement of theme (‘contradiction is inherent and | not alternate in sense ordering.’). Allusions to other poems and poets also seem prominent in this rhythm. The above excerpt seems to be channeling the spirit of Blake:

> I turn my eyes to the Schools & Universities of Europe
> And there behold the Loom of Locke, whose Woof rages dire,
> Washd by the Water-wheels of Newton: black the cloth
> In heavy wreaths folds over every Nation: cruel Works
> Of many Wheels I view, wheel without wheel, with cogs tyrannic
> Moving by compulsion each other, not as those in Eden: which,
> Wheel within wheel, in freedom revolve in harmony and peace.
> ('Jerusalem', Ch. 1, plate 15, 14-20)[66]

The point is not so much that we catch specific textual allusions as that we intuitively hear such passages as consciously ‘poetic’: we hear the *language* of poetry as a self-reflexive mode of *voice*. Not any one individual voice, but a kind of idealised abstract of the human voice. This hearing is reinforced in the switch across to the other, ‘dark’, rhythm:

> By sonic socratic dub nett recusancy obsersive deduct interval
> exfold, train up pitch departures, percuss the air punctual let
> addit pressure point, aqueous gearing will screen hyperbaric fully
> virtual it is separation (pp. 652-3).

There is no flow here, no enduring semantic, grammatical or syntactic connection. The sentence lurches from one word to the next, with no inner tissuing to shape and modulate its movement; only a sterile unbreathing pulsion keeps things moving. In the airless mire of technical terms – 'deduct interval | exfold' – all hosting an empty *pondus*, there can be no lift, nothing to take the mind beyond the overbearing presence of the words; and these, stripped of referentiality, present us with inert sounds, mere noise. If the ‘light’ rhythm evokes human expressiveness, this ‘dark’ rhythm evokes the verbalised thought of a computer; some non-human form of consciousness operating on and within language.

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[66] Blake, p. 159.

The two rhythms are not always starkly differentiated, and often blend with each other. Once we develop a feel for their contrast and interchange, we can apprehend how they fold into each other and feel the contrast working at smaller and subtler scales, between phrasal units *within* a sentence.

> Catching up subliminal sudden paroxysm,
> power law in amble mounting rotation is a limit step yet dissimilar
> rank for rank notorious, what you know is not rate-dependent on blood
> flow through knowledge organs nor yet superscripted from a divine
> theodolite hard-drive (p. 645).

The deliberate evasion of a single rhythmic register may enact an ambiguity in the moral orientation of the speaking voice. Simon Perril has observed: 'The sense of wounded utterance that runs through Prynne's work is never allowed to convincingly occupy a pure register of moral outrage.'[67] Though Perril's characterisation of Prynne's aversion to a 'pure register' is convincing, there seems to be something more to the interplay of rhythm in *Kazoo Dreamboats*. So strong is this feature of the poem that to classify its operation and effect in terms of avoiding some undesired interpretation undersells its role. It is *constitutive* of something – but what? How does the contest of rhythm connect to 'What There Is'?

If we look carefully at the instances of the 'light' rhythm, what seems clear is that a unifying agent is the implied presence of voice. A voice disconnected from any one body of experience or memory, which emerges rather through a patchwork of utterances expressive not so much of a subject per se, but subjectivity in the abstract (though also including the notion of grammatical 'subject', and thus the 'subject' who channels language, for example, in the form of lyric poetry, or rhetoric). It is a hive-voice whose utterance seems fixed on the conditions of its own possibility:

> Do you recall the birthplace in bright sunlight its gleeful
> partition knowing the unknown a child accidental of kin, of
> its time I saw back to nothing twice over conscripted, on
> every green spray, and the larks they sang melodious, canorous

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[67] Simon Perril, 'Hanging on Your Every Word; J. H. Prynne's 'Bands Around the Throat' and a Dialectics of Planned Impurity', in *A Manner of Utterance*, pp. 83-103 (p. 86).

in every high degree (p. 648).

In the 'light' rhythm, the presence of cadence and the tissue of quotation at once suggest the spoken voice and the textual record, and the poem allows them to coalesce around the abstract figure of the speaker, the marker not of a subject, but of subjectivity itself, the conditions which make the subject possible. As Wilkinson has observed: 'even if the lyric "I" is removed from sight, the resonance of English lyric cadence summons the lyric "I" as a ghostly participant.'[68] This blending of textual and spontaneous utterance is reinforced by the poem's continual references to song. We have already heard Molly Malone; and in the passage above we can hear the old folk song 'The larks they sang melodious' (tellingly, a song of separation).

Indeed, the poem refers to itself as a song. We hear the tune's climax in its elegiac final words:

> To be this with sweet
> song and dance in the exit dream, sweet joy befall thee is by
> rotation been and gone into some world of light exchange, toiling
> and spinning and probably grateful, in this song (p. 661).

The juxtaposition of ephemeral colloquial snippets (song and dance, been and gone) with the allusions to Blake ('Sweet joy befall thee!' from 'Infant Joy' in the *Songs of Innocence*)[69] and Christ's sermon on the mount ('Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin')[70] transfuses the former with the authority and emotive power of the latter so that 'song and dance' begins to radiate an elegiac power of its own: the rich accompaniments to the poem's 'exit dream'. The inversion of the biblical metaphor is equally significant when we explore the reference to Henry Vaughan:

> They are all gone into the world of light!
> And I alone sit lingering here;
> Their very memory is fair and bright,
> And my sad thoughts doth clear.

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[68] Wilkinson, p. 102.

[69] Blake, p. 16.

[70] Matthew 6. 28.

('They are all gone into the world of light!')[71]

Christ's lilies, neither toiling nor spinning, are emblems of the spiritual wealth waiting in the afterlife. Prynne, merging them ('by rotation') with the blessed dead of Vaughan's poem, imports heaven's store of beatitude and soul-wealth into a present immanence, making its gifts a feature of the poem's dialectics of rich and knowing contrasts, embodied in its rhythmic interplay, its 'world of light exchange'. In this world, both nature's glories – the lilies – and the voices of the dead are most definitely toiling and spinning. And what do they weave? A probabilistic recompense – they are 'probably grateful' – which the poem draws back into an affectionate irony. We may even recall the 'world of light exchange' as bearing in on the physical dimension: the exchange of photons for electrons that generates the electromagnetic force. Perhaps we then see a new field, where the lilies that once clothed the grass are replaced by the awesome energies of nature vibrating in the electromagnetic *field*.

This kind of richly suggestive intertextual tapestry is the characteristic work of the voice in the 'light' rhythm. This is what the voice sings; and the blending of the voice with the reality of matter, is the poem's song. In the immanent world of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, beatitude is the energy of dialectics, not timeless stasis. That is what 'this song' is: song, it stresses, is literally the final word in this 'world of light exchange', which is also the exchange of static transcendence for the trance of dynamic illuminated immanence. The poem opens this reality; and by its submerged half-rhyme with 'gone' we hear 'this song' leaving, with the same thought; but the poem has taught us that any ending is just another beginning.

The poem's voice, its 'I', is an intransitive voice: it is the fact of utterance rather than the connection between a body of memory and experience and a statement. This fact is simply a framework of cadence and allusion twisting upon one another in such a way as to break the old mould, letting fresh semantic energy burst free. And yet this process, it is suggested, also goes further than the mere kinetic transmission of separate planes of utterance. 'I saw', the voice keeps saying; the process is equally a process of vision, not of beings – there scarcely any real human figures in the poem – but of being itself, where life, like subatomic particles, is constantly spinning.

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[71] *The Metaphysical Poets*, ed. by Helen Gardner (Penguin, 1957), p. 275.

All this is gathered into the 'light' rhythm', as it is measured out, in cadence and quotation, by the affective tempo of an abstracted, intransitive subjectivity. Veronica Forrest-Thompson once remarked about the rhythmic structure Prynne's poem from *Brass*, 'Of Sanguine Fire': 'each different rhythm has its different theme'.[72] The theme of the 'light' rhythm is the voice: not a human voice, but the voice of language freed from any one human; a voice freely roaming over and among the multiple possible lines of word-meanings and syntactical connection, a reveler in ambiguity, whose playful impersonal wit and cadencing and texture of allusions also embody the structure of human subjectivity as recorded in poetry and transmitted in song.

* * *

If this is the 'theme' of the 'light' rhythm, what about the 'dark' rhythm? The voice and its abstract of human subjectivity seems deliberately obscured here:

> Float permit colloidal disjunctive or
> foam to battery, negative ions layoff not for truth this reversal
> been off done instinct ear flips, any more (p. 648).

Such rhythm, if it can be called that, excludes any kind of connected speech: the words are hardly more than noise. A static temporality of lumped and disconnected words, this rhythm makes the voice *impossible*; and wherever it seems to prevail, the grammar disintegrates, and the flow drops out of the poem; the abstract subjectivised temporality of the 'light' rhythm is eclipsed by something else: something 'inhuman', a kind of objective temporality. The impression is of the poem's perspective switching from an abstracted, disembodied human consciousness flowing through language, to a very concrete, bodied, inhuman one; and that very switching makes us feel each one more keenly while also reinforcing the vague notion that they are connected or dependent. Their unlikeness imparts greater definition to each while their continual interchange makes us feel that each somehow generates the other, as if each rhythm was struggling into being against the resistive force of the other, in such a way as to be constituted by the other's opposing effort to eclipse it. Discussing *Kazoo Dreamboats*, John Wilkinson has characterised this dialectic as follows: 'Language now becomes as much

[72] Veronica Forrest-Thompson, *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 146.

obstructive as generative; Prynne's work negotiates the anti-humanist dilemma [...] how to displace human presence from the centre of the medium constituting it.'[73]

The lack of flow and overall disconnectedness of the 'dark' rhythm emphasise the grammatical and syntactic isolation of the words even as it gathers them into a discernible though dim semantic zone. The rhythm of this zone is defined, it seems, not merely by the inertia of meaning we feel dragging on our reading; we associate this inertia, this unbreathing vacuum, with the fact the words often ramify from a particular type. To return to the example from above:

> By sonic socratic dub nett recusancy obsersive deduct interval
> exfold, train up pitch departures, percuss the air punctual let
> addit pressure point

The technical vocabulary here does much to obscure the 'voice' of the light rhythm. As the flow drains out of the sentence, the lack of it in turn isolates the words as individual units. This explains the dilution of meaning we feel in such words: 'exfold' for example, because the sentence offers it no coherent attachment in its syntax, seems to have meaning purely in the way it belongs to a particular *diction*; in the way it 'exudes' scientific terminology. And as these words gather together, both within particular sentences, as here, but also over the poem as a whole as a specific *frequency* of diction, they cohere into a generic discursive field which broadly suggests the process scientific inquiry but without specifying its objects or results. In fact, the whole field comes to stand as a metonym for the reality revealed by such inquiry, which at the poem's recurrent promptings we associate with its focus on quantum activity and the electromagnetic field, its concern with 'the molecular universe'. And when we feel this field of diction acting strongly in the poem, we can also feel the 'dark' rhythm, which holds and shapes this field, taking over the metonym: so that through the rhythm, in combination with the disjunctive syntax, we are offered an intimation of the 'molecular universe' as a powerful resistive presence, blurring or obscuring or eclipsing the 'voice' of the 'light' rhythm.

Thus the poem elides the metonymic value of single words with the metonymic frequency of the rhythm more generally: it blends the static isolation of the words with the strange, jarring movement that marks out their semantic zone. The diffusion of the field of diction into the 'dark' rhythm also makes the effect more dynamic, sensual, and immediate: we feel or experience the

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[73] Wilkinson, p. 102.

'dark' rhythm's 'theme', non-human 'life', since the rhythm gives us the feeling of entering in real time the world given by this field of discourse; and the overriding effect is the alien, resisting power of it. D. W. Harding has explored the power of rhythm to evoke what he calls 'inanimate movement – of trees or water for example',[74] and the poem seems to be doing something along such lines by suggesting the movement or activity of non-human life. Just as the 'light' rhythm discloses an intransitive human subjectivity, so the 'dark' rhythm discloses the inhuman world of matter itself, the product of investigative inquiry stripped of the investigator. The 'dark' rhythm thus not only obscures human subjectivity but also generates inhuman objectivity.

This enacts 'poetic thought'. In his essay on the subject, Prynne wrote:

> Not all activities of poetry and its composition can be found to work with and through poetic thought. Nor is an end-productive subject-thinker, an identified poet-in-charge, required. The activity of thought resides at the level of language practice and indeed is in the language and is the language; in this sense, language is how thinking gets done and how thinking coheres into thought, shedding its links with an originating sponsor or a process of individual consciousness.[75]

Prynne had hinted at this process in an earlier essay on the translation of difficult poetry:

> The relations of thought to meaning and argument to enquiry lie somewhere within the experience of language structures, but often not along the regular lines of normal sense. So that if a reader or translator can enter the text-space of language used in these intensely non-normal ways, a poem may reveal some of its internal energy, or poetic thought itself.[76]

In both passages, Prynne emphasises that 'poetic thought' takes place within the language; indeed its energy *is* the poem's language. This involves removing from the poem any identifiable

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[74] Harding, p. 93.

[75] 'Poetic Thought', p. 596.

[76] J. H. Prynne, 'Difficulties in the Translation of "Difficult" Poems', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1/3 (Easter 2010), 151-66 (p. 158).

'thinker'. This removal, and this thinking, is what the contest of rhythms in *Kazoo Dreamboats*, ultimately, is doing.

Of all Prynne's commentators, Keston Sutherland has taken Prynne's idea most seriously, and seems to have understood and explored it most fully. Analysing the essay 'Poetic Thought', Sutherland has glossed the relationship between the removal of the subject-thinker from the poem, and 'poetic thought': 'the subject is what must be let go if truth, whose most important form is poetic thought, is to be heard.'[77]

According to Sutherland, this truth, which rests upon 'the destruction of subjectivity' is rooted in knowledge manifested in two things. The first is language::

> The creation of knowledge by the destruction of subjectivity is not at the same time the restoration of the subject, for Prynne, but movement is backward toward the truth of language conceived to exist "prior to" any subject. This truth is conceived in the geological form of a non-human linguistic "internal agency" sedimented in "the lexis," which Prynne has described as "the deposits and relationships which comprise words before they are recruited into the action of human agency."[78]

Language, but a language prior to any one subject. This is a hard thought. It is perhaps easier to understand if we remember that Prynne conceives of consciousness as essentially a specific mode of language. In his essay, 'The Poet's Imaginary', Prynne writes:

> even within the deep interior consciousness and its preconscious flanking territory, and maybe especially there, the processes of mental and emotional activity are structured like language, just as is the interior silence between bouts of notional utterance;

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[77] Keston Sutherland, '*Sub Songs* versus the Subject: Critical variations on a distinction between Prynne and Hegel', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Luna and Walton, pp. 123-141 (p. 130).

[78] Ibid., p. 124.

And not only is consciousness a kind of 'speaking' in this sense, but language in fact constitutes subjectivity itself. Prynne goes on to argue: 'language characterizes and composes the person'.[79]

We only have to squint our logic here, in a way so attractive to Prynne's mind, to see that the idea of a language prior to the subject is also a kind of linguistic unconscious; not of the person, not a personal unconscious, but the kind of ocean of linguistic possibility that Prynne sees as underlying the person, whose realisation into a more composed and concrete form 'characterizes' the person. The language prior to the subject is just the conditions of subjectivity, the conditions of consciousness, in its yet-to-be-realised state; a molten plasma of potential utterance, connection, meaning. 'Poetic thought', Sutherland argues, allows us to glimpse this turbulent reservoir. The second thing it allows us to glimpse is objective reality, properly speaking. The truth of 'poetic thought', he argues, involves 'our responsibility to real objects that are permanently and in truth not-you.' Just as 'poetic thought' leads us back to language before its realisation in and by a speaker, so it also leads us back to a world that is not dependent on human consciousness: 'The work of poetic thought...establishes the reality of the world prior to its perception and interpretation by subjects'. The process leads us to a place where 'we' don't exist: 'poetic thinking is what makes the prior reality of the world...irrefutable.'[80]

The world of *Kazoo Dreamboats* is very much 'permanently and in truth not-you'. The 'real objects' it describes are the world of matter, the base-constituents of the cosmos, where contradiction operates: the poem embodies, as Prynne says in his essay, 'the working encounter with contradiction at the level of the material substrate'.[81] It does so in its rhythms. And the contest of rhythms allows us to feel and experience, since rhythm is the most sensual and apprehensible means of feeling and experiencing it, the dialectic between a 'thinking' language and the 'unthinking' reality of 'the world prior to its perception and interpretation by subjects'.

* * *

This approach to rhythm is not unprecedented in Prynne. His poetry has gradually been developing a use of rhythm that allows it to embody or enact powerful objectifying forces. Rhythm, in his poetry, is how we come to apprehend these forces at a level below the merely discursive critique of them. Though we are encouraged in *Kazoo Dreamboats* to 'Enter the time

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[79] J. H. Prynne, 'The Poet's Imaginary', *Chicago Review*, 58:1 (Summer 2013), 89-105 (p. 95).

[80] Sutherland, p. 129.

[81] 'Poetic Thought', p. 597.

stream arbitrarily' (p. 644), the temporal value of rhythm has been a deliberate feature of Prynne's writing from the very beginning of his career.

The White Stones (1969), a sequence of meditative lyric poems, largely characterised by the implicit or explicit presence of an unnamed by tacitly autobiographical first-person speaker in the tradition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's 'conversation poems', has an energy of bold and careful thought, with irony at the passionate centre, circled by tender feeling. Its rhythm aims at a constant throb of local surprise inside a long-range, discursive flow. In the motion of its thought there is a commingling of small and large sensitivities:

> The street that is the
> sequence of man
> is the light of his
> most familiar need,
> to love without being stopped for some im-
> mediate bargain, to be warm and tired
> without some impossible flame in the heart.
> As I walked up the hill this evening and felt
> the rise bend up gently against me I knew
> that the void was gripped with concentration.
> Not mine indeed but the sequence of fact,
> the lives spread out, it is a very wild and
> distant resort that keeps a man, wandering
> at night, more or less in his place..
> ('The Common Gain, Reverted')[82]

Here Prynne uses judicious and irregular line breaks to pivot the possessive lyric cadence towards fresh stirrings. The effect of this is not a pathos of emphasis at rise or set of the line, but scruple: an ongoing fluid intelligence. This scruple is often amplified by variation in line-length, a dialectic whereby the longer, more traditional unit receives regular checks from abrupt dwindlings. This has been evident since the *Kitchen Poems* (1968):

> No resolve about places, the latch-key to

[82] *Poems*, p. 89.

our drifting lives, seems relevant without
the smallest notion of dust. How to
purge the dismal objection to this, remains
a question. Not to be answered, but used,
as a metabolic regulator: pulse rate, place
rate, dust. If you lie on your back the
literalness of that position is a complete
transfer. Thus I
dream about courage
but love chiefly
several friends
and one woman
who is the Lady
of wherever we
may go.
('A Gold Ring Called Reluctance')[83]

These poems build out a network of small arrests: lines of thought carefully checked and rechanneled; and over this rich uncertainty the thought goes hesitantly but resolutely on, feeling for the next hold. All toe first, in delicate stepping.

Brass reinvented this energy in harsher, more abrupt rhythms. These sucked out the lyric oxygen, and constricted the thoughtful throat. Things got firmer, harder, denser, greyer. The affect of the poems is rooted in some bitter aftermath Where the rhetoric of *The White Stones* was consciously designed to move and persuade, the jagged, stuttery line movement of *Brass* jars and blurs and jangles. The effect is akin to satire; the rhythm enacts a kind of mock appropriation, of the very force or atmosphere the poems seek to critique. The humanist masonry of *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* is stripped out, the human face of its scruple is squeezed off; everything is sped up:

Swift as a face rolled away like
pastry, turned up the stairwell oh
cough now room for two &

[83] *Poems*, p. 21.

faced with bodily attachments:
evidence hovers like biotic soup, all
transposable, all alike.
('Of Sanguine Fire')[84]

Scouring the face: this is an image for the whole development of *Brass*. There are hints of an overall movement away from pathos, scruple and discretion as bounding the active zone, permeable but still intact, of conscience, towards an overriding flatness, where everything is blurred into one transactable material: 'all | transposable, all like.' The rhythm seems to acknowledge the fact that, according to Tencer, 'the capitalist workaday world seems designed to block and belittle poetic thinking altogether, to stymie its natural flow.'[85] The 'flow' of *Brass* is, by contrast, aligns itself with the flatter, flattening epistemic and ontological rhythms of what is sees as 'the capitalist workaday world': its flows are flows of exchange, and its twitchy rhythms are jarred by their absorption of discursive rates, swaps, futures, options, derivatives, IPOs, leveraged buyouts, growth indices, and discretionary compensation regimes. The rhythm *becomes* the satire. Hall writes that Prynne's poems 'create an experience through language rather than a representation of the experience, and do so by utilising the limitations created and determined by the language of the dominant power structure.'[86] The experience of the rhythm is the experience of 'the dominant power structure'; which is satirical in its very flatness, a complete embodiment which leaves few gaps for any outside critique. In his later poetry, Prynne develops this into a rhythm focused around switches:

You bring and tide over, produce elision's disparate
reversion to wet climbing by a crook intern, backed
to relish affirming deterrence. Flashing remix over
its wing circles will pinion stacks over plaster, blue
sticker branded for both took parting. Shook to gain
what both heard, aside from pennants stripping tinker
phantom bark entries, baying red gape stilbite intruded
awaken to leaf right through a fully shattered book.

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[84] *Poems*, p. 175.

[85] Tencer, p. 36.

[86] Matthew Hall, *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* (Cambridge Scholars, 2015), p. 7.

(*Red D Gypsum*, 1998)[87]

This kind of arrangement is the base-mould for much of the development of Prynne's later work. Time here is both a broad overall passing and a marked inner frequency: bare unbounded flow, enfolding a steadying network of verbal linkages over its language field. These linkages indicate a different kind of consciousness. An impersonal consciousness. With less of a conscience, such as we felt in the rich sentience of *The White Stones*, with its more clearly identifiable organic and bodied speaking subject. And the inner dispute that these linkages seem to hold against their verbal environment of almost bare noise recreate the fraught contest of the subject with his or her environment, whether we call this late capitalism or some glaring vice within it.

The metrical unit of this alternate consciousness is the oxymoron, the chiasmic progress of impersonal thinking. And the frequency, or switching, is not, or not only, a process combining mental hesitation into a felt and physical hesitation; but the jostle of various and plural sense-commitments, each given its due. By the time we reach *Acrylic Tips* in 2002, these starchier rhythms are firmly in place:

Admission in rain harvest her hair stroking his cheek
in compound reflected, at sleeve anchorage re-echo
tendon drill, rolled-up warm fettle.[88]

Adjusting for the form, this could be taken straight from *Kazoo Dreamboats*. In the volumes following *Acrylic Tips*, we hear this same rhythm, again and again, as an expanding stream:

Leading out proven sub
manage ever in fold, rift token will to redeem
or flagging, a massive glib finish.
(*To Pollen*, 2006) [89]

For back

[87] *Poems*, p. 446.

[88] Ibid., p. 541.

[89] Ibid., p. 582.

> for on for all at seven same verify pro digital fencer for litany
> roll to agreement retreat, get by sublation sanctified upside
> dizzy floats.
> (Streak---Willing---Entourage *Artesian*, 2009)[90]

and then in *Kazoo Dreamboats* itself:

> At surface scrap all of its hot cluttered void, promote weapon
> system aggression nowhere near contradicted not in show trials
> of adversary forensic lubricants, deep-fried football league (p. 654).

We can hear the clutter spreading out; airier but fuller. The difference, if there is one, lies in the acceleration we feel whooshing the language of *Kazoo Dreamboats*; corrupting the stream with more data and matter, the switches coming quicker, the juxtapositions getting sharper, the tone splintering, and the whole fabric more uniformly various. While this suggests greater deliberateness, the actual sense is of things at increasing distance from any direct control. Part of this process is the concentration of self-echoes. To return to the example above:

> At surface scrap all of its hot cluttered void, promote weapon
> system aggression nowhere near

The prosody and thought here reproduce, almost exactly, an earlier line:

> all well known the way is beyond limit weaponised
> jurisdiction rendered null
> (*To Pollen*)[91]

Where did this intense, self-contradicting music come from, more exactly? An important shift seems to have occurred in Prynne's work in the early nineties. The difference between this:

> O you stormy, set at par
> a thigh on the long haul

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[90] Ibid., p. 606.

[91] Ibid., p. 588.

blown restless, to be
worse, not abundant, not
delighted in pure spirit.
(*Word Order*, 1989)[92]

or this

A blow on the side of the mouth
strike harder, it is important
to be lyrical and joyous
then again, another
on the neck, how can this
be done so strongly without
the highest fidelity, for there is
no cry, hardly as to know
is to loosen, being not part of sense
or by auscultation, taking the air
(*Word Order*)[93]

and this

The twins blink, hands set to thread out
a dipper cargo with lithium grease enhanced
to break under heat stress. Who knows

what cares arise in double streaks, letting
the door slip to alternative danny boy in-
decision.
(*Not-You*, 1993)[94]

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[92] Ibid., p. 364.

[93] Ibid., p. 377.

[94] Ibid., p. 383.

is, though subtle, an emphatic departure. The poems of *Not-You* from 1993, as the title implies, no longer have their skin on the outside. There's a loss of sensation. The supple probing and sensing at the edges, still audible in *Word Order* from 1989, instead turns inwards; things harden to a shell, full of oppositional echoes, focused not on the other side, the world, but on each other. In the crunching, acronymic rhythm, the breath has a foot on it; *Not-You* is no longer lyrical *or* joyous. Something has occurred in the speed; the rhythmic movement is not just flatter but literally breathless; the switching of frequencies draws everything to the surface while abolishing the possibility of any extended cadence, any kind of breath. The activity of sense happens quicker. Like an axle, the poem revolves on words which touch the ground only briefly. The transfer of attention, from link to link, is accelerating; you feel shoved along. So although the air's been sucked out, it's actually looser: despite the odd rushed halting effect, it feels more *knowing*.

One of the things it knows, argues Jeschke, is 'the ruined reality of words in an age of accelerated communication'. She writes:

> there is a political necessity to acknowledging the ruined reality of words in an age of accelerated communication, when digital and mobile technologies are sold as easy techniques for overcoming social division on the back of unchanged structures of production and education. By emphasising the struggle of words to mean and connect, poetry in the era of communication technologies can only become more relevant and important than before: as a critique and image of the problems of alienation easily ignored when communication feels so easy on the level of consumption. Prynne's late poetry is, not least, funny, because it dares to allow words and meaning to crash, continue, crash again, get up again'[95]

On this account, the relentless collision of discourses, words crushed together with no breathing space between, both satirises late capitalist modes of communication while presenting them as, and presenting us with, aspects of the ritual in the mystery of our alienation. The compression of Prynne's late poetry is like a 'clue', according to Thornton, who comments on the 'propensity in much late Prynne for a manner at least superficially reminiscent of such compressed bulletins as news headlines, telegrams or cryptic crossword clues.'[96] Joe Luna, discussing *Biting the Air*

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[95] Jeschke, p. 70.

[96] Thornton, p. 78.

(2003) argues that the volume 'ventriloquises the language of universal domination.' It is 'less the "lyric written to capitalism"...than the lyric written *by* capitalism'.[97]

These descriptions undoubtedly catch something of the moral purport of Prynne's late poetry; but they also channel consolations. It is a kind of rapture to imagine that 'capitalism' can be manipulated so easily that it can be made to write lyrics; and that there is such a thing as 'the language of universal domination' which can be handily 'ventriloquised' to that end. The energy of these late poems may indeed have some moral force, but the poems seem to make their oblique force much more apprehensible than their moral, and the force emerges from a continuous and restless energy of inner contest. The telegrams and crossword clues address themselves as echoes within the poems. And Prynne's poetry following *Not-You* steadily evolves the energy needed to activate this self-contesting field. Formally, after this point Prynne's poetry begins to coalesce into sequences. Its mode of multiple and overlapping fragments, bound tightly in identical fields, converges on the aim of projecting a kind of thinking energy, which naturally dissolves the framing boundary of the individual poem. It's perhaps more accurate to speak of the poems from *Not-You* onwards as additive recurrences; an aggregate reflection of untitled homogenous word-puddles: poem-sequences whose constant inner contest and self-interference is their primary impulse.

> Who with he'll say climbing, to let blood slit imposed
> at a turret elevation to buffer high return. I saw
> her wings in speedy strip like a shadow in the sand
> or in growth like natural reason, her heart so vast
> as justly to make cause with the fiery fountain sealed
> on track right across *terra nullius* overhead.
> ('That Now She Knows', *Her Weasels Wild Returning*, 1994)[98]

Here the cadences of English lyric, the contours of song as shaped by the voice, establish a temporal platform of emphatic feeling, a rhythm, which the actual word-contents seem initially not to reciprocate, but rather stand apart from, in an enclosed order of their own. The dissonance leads to a de-subjectivised mode of thinking. And Prynne's technique since *Her Weasels Wild Returning*, has only deepened this tendency. It becomes concerned with networking

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[97] Joe Luna, 'Dominance Factor', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, pp. 87-100 (p. 98).

[98] *Poems*, p. 416.

across and over the partitions of individual poems; meaning occurs in streams and leakages, in traces and threads to be gathered up, connecting themselves to the before and after. In *Kazoo Dreamboats* he finds a new, oxymoronic form for it: one formless sheet of prose, but with breaks:

> Known to be, yet
> again firm as it looks, as if so marked by aperture no less patent.
> Blood pulse my view agency by force fed array calculus dot by dot
> fully able to be underfold. Enclave admittance rebuke to sender,
> mother to brother window too close to close (p. 639).

Before I move on to discuss how the energy of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, in the contest of its rhythms, differs from what came before, here it is worth observing that the process of displacing the subject from the centre of the poem, so evident in *Kazoo Dreamboats* and the volumes leading up to it, in favour of channeling larger forces, whether 'the capitalist workaday world', or objective reality prior to its perception by humans, or a 'thinking' lexis divorced from a thinking subject, has attracted some powerful and subtle poetic dissent.

In her poetry Denise Riley has also brought to attention that aspect of the English poetic cadence that acts for the poet as enduring retreat and shelter from the vicissitudes and attritions of language in its bare, undeliberated state.

> O great classic cadences of English poetry
> We blush to hear thee lie
> Above thy deep and dreamless.
> ('When It's Time To Go')[99]

The musical phrase is longer in Riley than in Prynne, and more candid with itself in the recognition of its own craving for harmony. In many of her poems its play infolds and expresses a more concentrated thoughtfulness than the kind of thoughtfulness Prynne is after. In Riley thinking is a kind of light intensifying at the edges of the poet's silhouette, compressively shaping out the resistance in the hard dark at the poem's core. This steadfastness of resistance to its own thinking gives us the bare outline of the poet herself, so the whole method is more strongly indicative of an individual thinker, as a receiver, maker and transmitter of the relations

[99] Denise Riley, *Selected Poems* (Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2000), p. 59.

which constitute thought. Prynne's contractions and shoe-hornings coincide with the ambition to exclude the presence of a single mind to which a thought or image occurs. The aim is to maximise the range of thought by ceding its field-space to language itself. The potential for disdain and a dehumanising ethereality inhering in such an aim finds meets its proper and apt criticism in another poem of Riley's:

> A struggle for mastery to most speak
> powerful beauty would run any
> attention or kindness clean out
> of town in angry rags.
> ('Poem Beginning With A Line From Proverbs')[100]

The suspicion of poetry's gilding and aestheticising power – the very thing that makes it moving, memorable, *powerful* (who would want a weak poetry on those terms?) – which animates Riley's particular ethics would inevitably look askance on any project that would seek to master such suspicion towards the goal of abolishing the subject; even, and particularly, where the mastery included and took its form from an integration of the rhythms of larger 'objective' forces.

* * *

These forces seem to have evolved. In the volumes previous to *Kazoo Dreamboats*, the rhythm seemed to embody, as satire, the social and political conditions of being. By contrast, the rhythms of *Kazoo Dreamboats* enact a dialectic between the subjectivity latent in the lexis (the 'voice' of language) and the objectivity of matter (the unvoiced presence of non-human reality, the universe). And the switching between rhythms seems to blend these attenuated forms of human-potential and non-human being: it enacts a vivid yet difficult-to-imagine dialectic of *song* and the cold objectivity of matter, or inanimate life. Donald Davie once observed, primarily of *The White Stones*: 'in Prynne's poems man saves or at least preserves himself always and only by moving patiently on and over the surface of a landscape.'[101] In *Kazoo Dreamboats*, the contest in rhythms seems to evoke both 'man' in the abstract, as human potential, a figure who is 'moving

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[100] Riley, p. 55.

[101] Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) p. 128.

patiently on and over' a particular terrain, the terrain of language, and the land itself – under its philosophical and scientific emblem of *matter*. And the dialectic between the two rhythms performs, at a different plane, on a different *surface* we might say, Davie's observation of the significance of this essential dynamic contact between the earth and human being.

By this contact, the poem incorporates song, the human scale a potentiality within language, into the not-song of nature. The poem dynamises the 'thought of nothing' within its intertexual 'song and dance' in its own 'poetic thought'. We remember that

> The song of birds that do not sing,
> because there are none where else they would sing, not from absence
> nor migrancy, the not-song is from not-being and not merely not
> there nor not-possible nor silentness falling rapt upon attentive
> deaf ears (p. 649).

If poetry is the record of the human voice calling out to the world, then in *Kazoo Dreamboats* the world, the reality of life previous to the human voice, stands over and against this calling; in this world, the void is 'at its natural frequency', a frequency which can be summed up as 'not'. The poem strives to draw from this 'not' something over and beyond negation: it wants to draw out and make us feel the actual force of unbeing as a fact of nature itself. The exchange of rhythms helps us feel this as something happening in real time in the poem, just as through the abstract human consciousness perceptible in the poem we can 'hear' the dialectic between being and unbeing if we listen 'rapt' and with 'attentive | deaf ears'.

V

THE REALITY OF *KAZOO DREAMBOATS*

So far I have attempted to account for *Kazoo Dreamboats* as a marvelous and perplexing reading experience. Nothing can diminish or impair the frank excitement that the poem affords in this regard. It is a unique work of enormous power and extraordinarily rich suggestiveness; one of Prynne's crowning achievements, within a body of work that already boasts several of those.

But insofar as the poem is informed by certain key ideas and critical attitudes, these demand a strong scrutiny, and strong challenge, which may nonetheless leaves the pleasures of the poem intact. It is possible, and often inevitable, that this investigating, probing and testing of a poet's positions as expressed in critical prose should lead to coolness and antipathy for those ideas and attitudes, even as the poem itself, though drawing directly upon them, retains all its vigour and strength, separate from fracas of the critical inquiry, though intimately involved and connected with it. This is a process I intend to undertake now: a deeper exploration of certain ideas which I have already touched on as essential to the poem, which Prynne has expressed, and others have developed, in recent critical writing. This process is particularly apt for a poem that claims, as *Kazoo Dreamboats* does, even with its tongue somewhat in cheek, to propound 'What There Is'.

Perhaps the most compelling, overarching question here, is this: is the poem's 'What There Is' *really* what there is? To answer this question we must first interrogate another: how can there be any account of what there is which excludes human being to the extent that *Kazoo Dreamboats* seems to do? Is Prynne saying that 'What There Is' is really what-there-is-without-us?

That certainly seems to be the case. And the moralising latent in Prynne's approach is made fully explicit by Keston Sutherland. The duty to remove the subject-thinker that lies at the heart of 'poetic thought' is – paradoxically – nothing less than the ultimate human task:

> the progress from poetic thinking to poetic thought is the essence of what Prynne...calls "the work of enhanced consciousness which is the human task, if not its paramount destiny." This moral duty is absolute in Prynne late poetry[102]

[102] Sutherland, p. 135.

Absolute moral duties. In his tendency to bombast, Sutherland exemplifies the debasing effect of such exalted platitudes:

> For Prynne, at least from within the ardent perspective of his poetry itself, the subject who engrosses the whole of truth is a disgusting contraption for silencing objects and the *lexis* and is fundamentally predatory and imperial in its reach[103]

In carrying out its absolute moral duties, we expect Prynne's poetry to be nothing less than *ardent*. But the caricature of the predatory and imperial 'subject who engrosses the whole of truth' is comically grotesque, ardent or not. Who would not remove such an absurd entity? At the same time as the heroic absolutism of Prynne's approach to the subject, so attractive to Sutherland, gracefully suspends the less rhetorically pliable reality of human particularity, it suspends the very thing that could make its efforts sound in reality, rather than in the bathos of hyperbole. When trading in absolutes the difference between 'a' and 'the' becomes moot. The particularity of 'a' subject grounds poems and poetics in a living channel with the real; the generality of 'the' subject sunders such connection: 'the subject' refers to everything and nothing. What is 'the subject' – a unit of philosophical conceptuality, a grammatical datum, a platitude, all of humanity? Its very vapidity is effective for Prynne, since it can be made to stand for everything he feels licensed to exclude. He even links the alleged moral corruption of the 'subject' with the structure of language itself. In his commentary on Herbert's poem 'Love ⌈III⌋' he writes:

> human language is imperfect and is damaged by sin, not least in relation to man's conception of his own self, inner and outer, puffed up with tendency to vainglory and selfishness even in the most vehemently powerful moments of exchange with the divine. The very format of utterance grammar, with the subject-position in English syntax coming before and governing all by way of a sequent predicate, performs and expresses this vaunted, front-loaded selfhood.[104]

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[103] Ibid., p. 129.

[104] J. H. Prynne, *George Herbert, 'Love ⌈III⌋': A Discursive Commentary* (Cambridge: privately printed, 2011), p. 34.

Though the first sentence above inhabits the spiritual self-consciousness of the speaker of Herbert's poem, the second is pure Prynne: 'the subject' and grammar itself suffer from 'front-loaded' selfhood. The sinful subject is responsible for sinful language, and vice versa. As Sutherland explains, this creates a moral imperative for dismantling or destroying the subject as an emblem of the human:

> the subject shapes itself to untrue language, *obviously* by the use of platitudinous idioms and empty phrases, and *implicitly* in all uses of language to think that do not contribute to the extinction of the thinking subject. The subject is impotent to generate poetic truth, which can be reached only at the extremes of language where the subject has been exceeded and is no longer required (poetic thought resembles technology in the respect that it makes human activity superfluous).[105]

Presumably the thinking subject called Keston Sutherland was indeed required for this exegesis of the necessity of extinguishing the thinking subject. How far this subject has shaped itself to untrue language, in performing this thinking that, we assume, has not yet contributed to its own extinction, may be left an open question.

The thinking subject called John Wilkinson is happy join him on this hyperbolic ground. Prynne's 'radical anti-humanism', he says, is 'not a repudiation of the lyric merely, but a repudiation of the anthropocene era.' *Merely* the anthropocene era? Wilkinson does at least acknowledge that, in 'Prynne's dialectical universe of particles and forces', there is a question as to 'how the truth of such a universe might be accessible to human experience'. To which he adds, shrewdly: 'That is, if truthfulness is not to be contrived by the sleight of a shift from physics to metaphysics.'[106]

There has been some 'sleight of a shift' in Prynne's conception of the moral import of his poetry, but if anything it has been the other way round: from metaphysics to physics. There has been a movement, in his criticism as well as his poetry, away from an understanding of the relationship between human being and the earth, informed by the immaterial communicating medium of spirit, which Prynne derives from Wordsworth and which he has revised in various direction,

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[105] Sutherland, p. 141.

[106] Wilkinson, pp. 101, 104.

and towards a more radical and complete materialism in which contradiction has replaced spirit as a fundamental mode of understanding. Contradiction, organised around self-contest, becomes a mode of acknowledging the real, a mode which is at once a metaphysical and ethical imperative. When Prynne imports contradiction into the working of physical reality, the shift is complete: contradiction operates at the level of object-reality, and to recognise this, which belongs to the activity of 'poetic thought', is both to understand 'What There Is' *and* fulfill an ethical duty, since it is also to participate in the 'contest', enjoined by contradiction, with received modes of being and cognition: as *Kazoo Dreamboats* says 'without contest equity | would fail' (p. 654). The move towards this notion of contradiction, with its implied removal of the subject-thinker, seems to have been influenced by Prynne's increased awareness of the moral corruption of the latter.

In his deeply felt commentary on Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey (written in 2001 but not published with additional notes until 2009), Prynne stresses that the absence of any mention of the abbey in the poem 'raises a more profoundly unspoken question, which is the relation of a living spiritual presence, paired within nature and the human mind, to the specific providential direction of a Godhead not reducible to a pantheistic sublime'. He goes on to add that, 'the natural feeds the emotional and metaphysical with the perspectives of focus and cumulative intensity, just as the metaphysical donates to the natural its reciprocating ardency of regard for natural occasions and their perceptible forms of local being.'[107]

The reference to 'natural occasions and perceptible forms of local being' is an apt phrase since it captures so well what seems to have disappeared from *Kazoo Dreamboats*. But it is hard not to feel the depth of Prynne's imaginative sympathy with what he is describing here: his profundity and tenderness of insight are eloquent of his rooted imaginative and affective loyalties, if not necessarily his intellectual trajectory. A passage from the commentary such as the following is resonant with the quality and strength of those correspondences:

> Former pleasures are formative of their successor insights, just as the greenness of woods and copses records the point of earliest entry into cherishment and gratitude felt towards the entire green earth of natural life. The landscape composed of memory still green and the greenness of the summer season likewise mark the connection between seasons of dearth and their subsequent

[107] J. H. Prynne, 'Tintern Abbey, Once Again', *Glossator*, 1 (Fall 2009), 81-88 (p. 84).

> regreening, the sweet inland murmur echoed in the comparable sweetness of restored sensation passing from blood to heart and heart to mind: a present pleasure as from a presence that self-construes upon reflection into the grandeur of fulfilled sublimity.[108]

In such a reading Prynne offers his own 'cherishment and gratitude': to Wordsworth, to the entire green earth of natural life, and to a poetry that succinctly entices the mind onto a 'landscape composed of memory still green'. He reciprocates the poem's grandeur and sublimity, with a grandeur of analytical inference, and a sublimity of close reading.

By contrast to the vivid ground described here, in *Kazoo Dreamboats* the ground is 'divided | by itself' (p. 639). And the grand vistas in which it participates are no longer obtainable from the perspective of an 'elevation of spirit'; there are no vistas in *Kazoo Dreamboats*: our knowledge of being and nature emerges in contradiction, to which spirit is subordinate: 'elevation of spirit' as hesitation' (p. 641). It seems that the demotion of spirit under the aegis of contradiction is underpinned by the ostracisation of what spirit connects to the earth: 'the subject'.

Prynne explicitly links spirit and contradiction in his essay on huts and poetry, 'Huts': 'The intensities of poetic encounter, of imagination and deep insight into spiritual reality and poetic truth, carry with them all the fierce contradiction of what human language is and does.' He adds the slightly menacing coda that, 'There is no protection or even temporary shelter from these forms of knowledge that is worth even a moment's considered preference, even for poets or philosophers with poetic missions.' There is no protection since 'The house of language is not innocent, and is no temple.'[109] And as we know, the house of language is where 'the subject' lives.

In his essay 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', Prynne illustrates the deepening role that contradiction was coming to play in his conception both of poetic composition and 'what poetry needs to do': 'The active poetic text is thus characteristically in dispute with its own ways and means, contrary implication running inwards to its roots and outwards to its surface proliferations: not as acrobatic display but as working the work that, when fit for purpose, poetry needs to do.' He links this self-contesting process to 'ethical seriousness': 'These are the proper arguments of poetry as a non-trivial pursuit, the templates for ethical seriousness.'

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[108] Ibid., p. 84.

[109] J. H. Prynne 'Huts', *Textual Practice*, 22:4 (2008), 613-633 (pp. 630-1).

Although he doesn't say 'these are the *only* proper arguments', Prynne is nevertheless sketching out the terrain of moral absolutes that Sutherland will later fill in. He also says in the essay: 'no poet has or can have clean hands, because clean hands are themselves a fundamental contradiction. Clean hands do no worthwhile work.'[110]

Who ever claimed to have clean hands? In any case, here we have an *undesirable* kind of contradiction: certainly not the desiderated contradiction involved in the work 'that poetry needs to do', and which *Kazoo Dreamboats* does. Instead of reflecting carefully and with his keen eye for recesses of richness on the 'fundamental contradiction' of the poet's situation in using language, in order to explore the flawed and contradictory 'subject', Prynne chooses simply to expel the subject entirely. Perhaps because the subject is too awkward, too messy, too close, and too incommensurate with the plane of abstract conceptuality at which this essay and *Kazoo Dreamboats* operate, and too resistant to neat formulations of what constitutes 'ethical seriousness'. Paradoxically, by expelling the undesirable contradiction of the flesh-and-blood subject, he seeks to have the very thing he complacently decries: clean hands.

In his *Paris Review* interview, Prynne said that, 'I've always held this view that poets had better be clear about where their allegiances lie, because otherwise they're going to go sailing off into an empyrean, which is a luxury they should never afford themselves.'[111] Yet nothing could be more empyrean-bound than talk of the corrupt 'subject'. Repudiating the anthropocene era is the greatest luxury there is. The moment we seek to imaginatively correlate this notion of 'the subject' with human particularity, Prynne's language, sailing in the ether, fades into glittery nothingness. Platitudes, rhetoric, moralistic (absolute) postures are all that remain, looming in the haze. His abstractions glide over life; they can only grip onto other abstractions. If there is no need to test ideas against life, all ideas are both valid and invalid; anything is possible; nothing is changed, and stasis rules. No 'truth', poetic or otherwise, can emerge from such a process, since truth cannot become truth without passing through the refining fire of human being; 'truth' means nothing to molecules. Unless a notion of spiritual reality, whose essence is the intuition of connection between human inwardness and the external world, exists to validate such a channel of meaning. And yet Prynne would very much have his ethical seriousness, his desiderated contradiction – which appears to have replaced his conception of spirit – keep contact with life.

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[110] J. H. Prynne, 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', *Chicago Review*, 55:1 (2010), 126–57 (p. 141).

[111] Dolven and Kotin, p. 200.

In his essay, 'The Poet's Imaginary', he discusses another permutation of contradiction, here in a more literal form of 'self-contest': the interior struggle in the poet between the 'poet human' and the Muse-like 'associate imaginary figure' in the composition of poems. This struggle, he writes, cannot just be about 'style, and so on': it must engage

> more important commitments, to honesty and truth but also to engagement with fundamental conflict between self and world, between a world profiled to match the desires of the installed central self...and the questions of justice within otherhood, an exterior human community: a planet being greedily used up by devouring pursuit of advantage and opportunity.[112]

The phrase 'the installed central self' once again summons the morally corrupt 'subject' as a pantomime villain. One abstraction, infected by moralising, spreads the contagion: now the world is equally sinful, being nothing more substantial than a mere profile of the subject's desires. And yet, though Prynne's moral engagement is dissipated into well-intentioned banality by its lack of any concrete human referentiality, and seems to rely on the complete and uncritical assent of his readers to supply the lack from their own store, his poetic commitment to 'an exterior human community' is clearly real. But how can poetry engage any human community when the recurring conceptual image of the human – the subject – has been ostracised and cast out?

The way, he suggests, is to make contradiction an end in itself. He writes in his 'Love ⁅III⁆' commentary that Herbert's poem is

> an intensive environment in which to encounter thought directly, to work through its conflicted and dramatised experience, to set the spiritual and rational parts of man within the ambit of poetic art and poetic form, so as to protect intrinsic contradiction from facile reduction to unity while intimating, with the greatest alertness of insight, how contradiction may be the essential precondition to the claim of the poem to have found and defined...its own way subsequently forward.[113]

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[112] 'The Poet's Imaginary', pp. 98-9.

[113] *George Herbert*, p. 91.

The phrase 'to protect intrinsic contradiction' is a resonant one: the poem must prevent its terse inner drama from slipping into an easy and garrulous symmetry of question and answer: the poem's doubts, like its certitudes, must remain taut, at maximum charge, unresolved, if either is to be real, and the poem to achieve its potential being. The concluding flourish 'its own way subsequently forward' sounds like a platitude, but isn't, by virtue of the real body of concern that Prynne, with tremendous imaginative sympathy and insight, brings out of Herbert's poem, and which lies in all great poems; a living body that efficaciously shapes our attention outwards, freshening and energising it so powerfully that we briefly feel, and know, the life *of* the poem, the life *in* the poem, and life itself, as one.

This is a process I believe Prynne's 2019 volume *Parkland* aims at. As another long poem in prose, *Parkland* shares some strong formal links with *Kazoo Dreamboats*. They also share a number of thematic concerns, one of which is song. In his commentary on a song by the Elizabethan composer and lutenist John Dowland, Prynne writes:

> As this song is to be sung by different singers on different occasions, the song-event is removed from the claim to be a scene from life and becomes a new relationship, between the singer and his audience, assimilating into their own emotional response the prompting to relive the moment of grief called into being by the poet. This is passion by proxy: under the illusion of an unique occasion but intrinsically repeatable. The listener must be aware that this is a generic type of emotional predicament and its representation, and thus anonymous even when apparently most specifically personal[114]

This is a perfect description of the tone and content of *Parkland*. Though it has characters, it is essentially anonymous. Though it enacts the specific event of their meeting, there is no 'unique occasion': the 'moment of grief' that is dramatised is 'intrinsically repeatable'. The theme of the poem is the realisation of complicity, in exploitation and foreign war, within the interior terrain of the subject, the one who sings, and within song itself.

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[114] J. H. Prynne, 'Notes on 'I Saw My Lady Weepe', *No Prizes*, 5 (Winter 2016-2017), 19-31 (p. 26).

Parkland as a term denotes generic recreational green space, offering access to a carefully managed microcosm of 'nature', that is delineated and set apart from a surrounding urban environment. When the poem refers to the 'open field' in which its characters meet, it holds over it, against it, the image of the environing city in a teasing irony. In this field two characters, Tom and Peter meet the Queen of Sheba; the two, we learn, are 'half-brothers never inept to glimpse her rightful appearance' (p. 1).[115] They come to sing. The tenor of the poem is sweetly pastoral, with a formal and courtly serenity that recalls Sidney's *Arcadia*. In its chaste and decorous choric atmosphere, every appearance, every feature in the 'field', seems to be rightful, mutually acknowledged, proceeding by just and recognised authority, and calmly ordered:

> Wisely she guides their songlines, in the open field of this place her palace domain, the words come into mind by influx of care discovered (pp. 1-2).

The 'open field of this place' is one apparently free of tension: all three characters cohere within its boundaries in a decorous mannered choreography. The mellifluous 'queen' leads a song and dance that is poised and endemic, in an atmosphere of timeless innocence which the imagery of water emphasises:

> Queen bee honey song she leads to cherish as they do following her due. Bonds of love in portraiture included. By loyalty the shared songlines inviolate along grass stems swaying and bending, Tom sees well enough the open difference and will sing for it, lyrical and intaken as Peter holds out his arm to give her royal steadiness, they both cherish outside premiss encounter. There is a limpid slight stream hereby, running over its bed, all three can hear the soft chuckle of small sounded stones, as in lavish memory (p. 2).

Everything seems to have happened before, as in lavish memory, or in the anonymous, intrinsically repeatable song Prynne described in his commentary on Dowland. All passion is proxy here. However, the movement of the poem is to gracefully unwork this bucolic seclusion, unraveling it from within, while maintaining its formal outline. The open field fringes on a larger desolation, just as parkland is hemmed in by the city, and the poem reveals the porosity of the separating membrane. The note of doubt is at first focused in the protagonists' names. Peter,

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[115] J. H. Prynne, *Parkland* (Cambridge: Critical Documents, 2019). All page references to the poem are taken from this.

Christ's rock, provides steadiness, while Tom – doubting Thomas – is a source of uncertainty, question and hesitation. Here, his doubt cannot be assuaged by seeing well enough the 'open' wound of Christ: instead of the wound the poem offers the euphemistic fig leaf of 'difference'. This is the first moment when blood is blended away. Nonetheless Tom cannot help querying:

> Why do we look when here, relative prospective gathers up, is there a reason?'
> Tom puts the query, slowly enough as a light tremor of air stirs across her face,
> hesitant (pp. 2-3).

The 'relative prospective' might be the characters maintaining their gazes upon each other, and not what on lies 'outside' the field. At the same time, the 'relative prospective' is glance at the future in relation to now. And the stir of air across the queen's face might offer an answer: for the light tremor of air is just as likely to be caused by aircraft on a bombing run, as it is by the choir of birds that inhabit the field. The poem's frequent references to Yemen, together with its glimpsed imagery of destruction, suggest some reference to the Yemeni civil war which began in 2014, news coverage of which intensified in the UK over the course of 2015 and 2016.

Though the characters are yet to see this note of darkness, the poem notices it for us, right at its opening:

> Now to see to sweep, over the parkland. Shall we view the shadow there, ready
> in close lock (p. 1)

This is the key question: shall we view the shadow there? The shadow of ruined buildings over the field? Over the course of the poem, the question becomes: shall we view the shadow *here*, in the gentle enameled world of lyric song, which is also the compassionate field, the conscience, of the singer. For here, as much as 'there', the shadow is also the obscure outline of human beings 'in close lock' in the target of a weapon's 'sight'. Darkness lurks in the corners of even the most innocent games:

> She Sheba shall be their chosen royal queen, the nominated Sheba lady at their
> minstrel oversight, as advised by a traded hoopoe bird this is more than a game
> for them, the open way to joy smudged by darkness (p. 1).

The poem creates a kind of oblique and dreamlike tension by its willingness to suspend the jarring and cutting counterthrust, dramatised in the sentences of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, in order to dwell more harmoniously in sequential scenic narrative:

> There was no delay in the daylight hour, all forward and previous the narrow rivulet glinting calmly tested (p. 5).

Most of the opening to the poem is calmly tested like this. Tested, it holds its delicate grace, its 'tact' and 'measure':

> Now these all sing together this refrain in measure, tact over as far as eye can see, even so (p. 4).

But the counterthrust does come: the syntax is gradually disrupted, allowing another rhythm to creep into the poem as if from a place of distant turmoil:

> Twainly above them far beyond turmoil their pair hands moving fully kept for flourish each the other her pearl-studded shellac orange debated, its evident outpost approach to mid discover and shade over turf founded, soon in prize tacit undburden length wishful major patient seam; bird-song again trill several pass from the front, where she rides cool close to water watched at costs sufficient (p. 5).

The jarring enters, but gently; the queen still 'rides cool'. But by the fourth section of the first part (the second part has six sections) we learn that 'she is indeed the scope for darker thoughts,'. Now the only lightly ironised morning of innocence has passed; now it is late – too late; and the open mouths in the field are not those of the singers, but those belonging to the starving:

> Under too late then, is hunger seen not far off (p. 13)

Now the rhythm crumbles the pastoral ease and steadiness into something more halting and troubled, more doubtful and doubting:

> Relay casuist loose change primal before best, cherish lost decree fuse, outreach
> spoilt running across the field now, not to stumble see your way playful unpaid.
> She is indeed the scope for darker thoughts, imminent Yemen lately memory
> dry mouth denied because too late now, self-graft by option frequent, sing
> louder in fear for sound broken in peril, song of harm (p. 13).

Hints of the war in Yemen transform the 'queen' into something more sinister: an actor in a geopolitical conflict. Now history and politics erupt into the poem, disturbing its 'measure', fracturing its timelessness: dry mouths come to drink the cool abundant water ceaselessly flowing in its stream. Devouring time enters with the hungry mouths of those displaced by war. The pastoral of mutual enjoyment in song, enclosed in the field, becomes a song of harm. And the singers, realising this, seem to agree to part:

> Her gaze still true for them but shadow unconsumed, we'll sing now but cast
> parted, seeds on stony ground, trade off to watch what you know is seen there,
> these flowers of speech in the lush illusion fieldways (p. 14).

The rhetoric of song in the open field of nature has become alive to its own artifice. Under 'nature' we see the manicured parkland. This transforms the whole 'field':

> The green path now also lazy and greedy, median grassland methane engines,
> wayleave inensate passive detriment (p. 14).

The Yemen battlefield and the lyric 'field' blend together. The poem dramatises the breakdown of the boundary through its syntax and rhythms: another 'measure' of speech begins to challenge and rupture the harmony of the 'three mortals singing in long search' (16) and reveals what is already *here*: the darkness in full view:

> Speech in the meadow, instruments of starvation in full view, water abducted
> from the stream; this is the song of care worn thin by violets violated; and yet
> her gaze not innocent does know in birth and almost prove its own prodigious
> tryst (p. 14).

The pun on violets/violence/violate rams home the point. Innocence leaks out of the pastoral allegory: violent geopolitics pours in. All the rest of excluded humanity, the hungry gather at the edges of the field, which yet holds to a vestige of its poise:

> So many are now hungry, close up to starving outside this field of calm in grace demurrer, invented and untrustworthy, inwardly flinched but scarce avoided, as birds do and the decurrent grasses, entrance ready taken (p. 18).

These starving mouths must sing for their supper, their song is a transactional plea for survival. The poem returns to the image of the open mouth as a voidal scream to shatter the 'sound parlour' of its pastoral, and as a site of enduring privation:

> Louder entrail by the sound parlour for valour takes momentum beside grant analogy, the aware reckon, sing for supper longer by hunger terrorise. Why tremble fast in view, spread injustice harm like hunger nil by mouth (p. 21).

This doubting, hesitating rhythm doesn't act in the same raucous, interrupting and peremptory way as the differing rhythms of *Kazoo Dreamboats*. But this uneasy balance of tempos dramatises a poise-before-the-fall that is just right for *Parkland*. For the glory of king and queen in the palace of the field mean poverty and famine elsewhere in the unequally distributed economy of the poem's song:

> Solomon in all his glory in deference to the heartland, unharmed queen in consort arrayed. What this means is widespread famine, many deaths sub-nourished (p. 22)

The poem comments in mock pity on the cry of the would-be innocents who are only now realising that the 'shattered ruins' of distant conflicts have always been *here*, in our 'open field': how were we supposed to know?

> How could they have known her realm for real is in shattered ruins, the pain of destruction and misery enslaved, and yet the bird messengers avouch disaster, the open gate like the mouth of terror, must it be as broken in hunger, her city in hold of rebels, populace at verge of frank starvation (pp. 27-8).

The poem would have us understand *our* complicity, supplying weapons to foreign regimes only to wince and flinch at *our* customers' use of them on their own populations:

> Bitter honey grips the throat, say what you like to weigh our own Brit supply, of weapons to control of this lasting punishment, ten mil a few steps away from death by hunger, many babes and childers. All this burns beyond reach, she cannot even bear to flinch, to apprise her loyal boys, open their eyes what is done in our name, arms and the man suborned (p. 28).

The song opens our eyes to what is done in *our* name, by *our* boys. It hopes also to make us see what our *naming* is doing. For our 'our' would exclude the 'many babes' dying anonymously in the desert. These too are 'ours'. The poem would thus make our own 'hearing' accountable:

> The song as ever sung will show in ear answerable, responsive allude embracement fault dressage yeast empire arisen chorus each day (p. 42)

The answer is to transform our shaken faith: not to look, like Tom, for proof, but to relent before life, before the reality of the field filled with what lies outside it, tuning our song to include it all:

> Relent life itself moist grateful call to order beyond duty of proof to truth, all three know it clear enough. Despite the doubt of season now is right or lucent acknowledgement to stand ready, for pledge in lamp for daylight climax, the boys gear up by pressure badge shrew running double relish prepared. Learning by tuning, set up to start, over (p. 52).

In what it calls its 'part-songs', the poem's penultimate section (section 8 of part 2) Peter and Tom are 'Learning by tuning' their song: to sing of the field from the perspective of the 'night plane' moving through darkness, and the fire of the incendiary burning up fertile ground:

> **Peter:** *fly over contented and eager, to look down*
> *from night plane not obscurely, pack ice igloo fall*
> *militant immunise forceps perfect in homage, in too.*
> **Tom:** *her valiancy face up not forgotten invited own*
> *ground of longing she bears Sheba's crown bairn on*

brow furrow omen Yemen, fire to plough fortune too (p. 55).

Their broken songlines are a potential mode of healing the previously unrecognised wound of what lay outside the field:

> Septic raid to avenge confusion rivers to cross sand deserted, Sheba's small field intensified day upon day news wave unrelenting greed reaching claim to finish our regiment. Loyal tremors shake the line of land park office, rent and broken as songlines mend the wound refused (p. 56).

In its finale, the poem once again 'relents' before what is 'true beyond doubt': that hurt and heart must sing together, each acknowledging each:

> Relentment versus grievance just tonic hive busy combs the heart, deep purpose strew quartz twin anthem prime acceptance prolific evidence true beyond doubt resentful hurt to hurt, heart to heart, ever in tune (p. 57).

This final note of significant reciprocity echoes the innocence of its opening from an altered – wiser, more wounded – locus. It reinforces, while retaining a suspicion of, an important structural feature, that there is a kind of narrative to the poem: it moves through days, it is sequenced in time. It works its elegiac effects far more gently and tenderly than *Kazoo Dreamboats*. It is slow, lento, relented. One reason why it is less jarring is the absence of line breaks. As a consequence, the presence of contradiction is less audible and vivid; the self-contest is spread over the mood of the poem, in a more subtle and graduated blending. This recognises the importance of the poem's theme and tenor of reciprocity, of mutual measure. As with the image of the garden stream that is sucked into the desert of the battlefield, the poem enacts a blending of scales, discordant rather than harmonising; an opening of consciousness which mingles inside and outside: or rather where looking at the outside reveals what's inside. Where the shocks and jumps of *Kazoo Dreamboats* dramatised its concerns with contradiction in object-reality and the elliptical energies of the quantum plane, *Parkland* is about incremental increases in awareness, the subtle shocks that mark the slow realisation of complicity, and what to do about it. It is not an overpowering metaphysical spectacle; it offers a very interior mood, a charmed meditative zone: here it carries out its testing and probing at the interiority of the compromised subject. The field is an inner one: it is language, it is the conscience of song. It is

our 'us'. The poem is about what to do with our doubt. We glimpse the darkness: will we truly *see* it, where it really lies?

The poem's drama stands at the edge of something. A kind of hyper-abridged *Paradise Lost*, it enacts a fall from innocence not as a momentary abrogation of faith but as the growing, maturing consciousness of error and guilt. But the protagonists never quite lose their poise; the whole form is geared to maintaining a decorous pastoral shell even as the song turns to air-raids. This is a satire of the desire for innocence, the refusal to accept complicity, or the refusal to see that the edenic field is just 'parkland', surrounded by a devastated city, full of empty mouths for which we must account in song. However, it also recognises that some originary strength might hold, with the right awareness, a song of truth and responsibility to the new field where the 'outside', with all its starving mouths, has been revealed on the inside too.

That is how the poem attempts to 'to protect intrinsic contradiction', to echo Prynne's phrase from his commentary on Herbert. By packing contrasts into the same plane: innocence and guilt, condemnation and hope. But does it?

One of the reasons Herbert was able to protect intrinsic contradiction was because there was an intrinsic contradiction to protect. For, as Herbert's poem shows, 'the subject' is the site of the most powerful forms of intrinsic contradiction in its relations to God and the world. The poem's speaker wishes to acknowledge guilt while wishing to have 'clean hands': as Prynne says, this is a fundamental contradiction. This is the very basis of the human.

Herbert's poem dramatised this in 'the subject': a particular speaker's struggle to accept grace. From the particular struggle we map another struggle, the living struggle which is every person's struggle. The particular is what keeps the poem's movement real: its energy is an energy to be felt in the body as well as the mind; just as the speaker's body is involved in the gentle beckonings from the figure of Love. To abolish the particular body, to abolish 'the subject', is also to abolish the ground for experiencing and participating in the poem's energy at any plane other than a mental plane. It is to abolish the prior ground of intrinsic contradiction which the poem reciprocates with the prior ground of itself.

To abolish the particularity of the subject, as Prynne does, is to be stranded in the realm of generalities. And there are no living frictions between generalities. There is no resistive force to charge a polar tension. Only particularity can supply that force. By removing 'the subject',

Prynne has abandoned his poetry to the blandness and conformity of the all-embracing 'the' and 'our'. Particularities, local variations, strong or subtle differences in emphasis between subjects, are effaced; all difference is absorbed into the monolithic 'the': 'the subject', 'the lyric', 'the song'. These are, properly speaking, categories, not living forces: and Prynne's poetry of concepts is entirely reliant on such categories, which have the same reifying homogenising tendency built into them that Prynne inflicts on his notion of 'the subject': instead of seeing variety and life, a living body, he sees stasis and conformity, a category. As a result, for all its depth and insight, *Parkland* cannot escape the plane of polemic: it is a critique offered as poetry. Its foundations are not in some exemplary particular experience as the foundations of Herbert's poem were: its foundations are in argument. As a result, its quality of reality, as a measure of the intensity of its contradiction, is severely undermined; and its moral force rests entirely upon a set of polemicised abstractions, upon categories.

What *Parkland* shows is how Prynne ends up, thanks to the removal of the subject, embroiled in a kind of deliberately virtuous circle of edgeless, frictionless generalities animated by a purely discursive passion. We are all complicit, the poem argues, everything is complicit: so let's aim for enhanced consciousness, let's tune our song. And yet, with our new consciousness, with our new song, all we can sing is that...we are all complicit. In this virtuous circle, all references to joy become a kind of dry-ice smoke pumped through the hole in the middle: affect for effect. Because the grand categories of 'we' and 'our' are all that's left us by his generalities.

One of the reasons Prynne's later poems struggle to leave the plane of argument and enter the plane of life is that they attend to their thought, their argument, before they attend to being. For Prynne, being comes after thought; and thought is derived from knowledge. As Olson recognised of Prynne:

> Prynne is so knowing…he's knowing like mad[116]

Prynne's polemical and ethical seriousness rests upon the ontological priority of knowledge. His writing, like *Kazoo Dreamboats* itself, is 'powered by love of | the known' (p. 650). Knowledge, not reality, is the substance from which Prynne weaves his tapestries of a non-representational *possible*; and this possible is then what he recasts as inhering in the *real*. Knowledge thus becomes the actual morphological underpinning of his poetic enterprise: the one condition which

[116] Quoted in Mellors, p. 106.

precedes all others. Given this, to read *Parkland* or *Kazoo Dreamboats* we must implicitly accept the fundamental intelligibility – possessed as knowledge – of the world, and its objects (people). It is also knowledge which transforms variety into category, people into 'the subject'. Prynne thus aligns himself with his own coinage of the philosopher which he set out in an early important essay, 'Resistance and Difficulty':

> If a philosopher is concerned to make intelligible the world around him, then its intelligibility must be of prior importance to the given fact that the world exists.[117]

In the emphasis on *thought* the entire subject-object order is deliberately inverted: thought and contradiction become "the world around", not something that occurs within, the philosopher-poet. The reality of perception is moot: the molecular and cosmic boundaries are what count; the headlines about the Yemeni conflict are what count, not the reality of war as directly experienced. For this reason, the essential vitality of *Parkland*, like the vitality of *Kazoo Dreamboats*, is without struggle. They dissolves the particular – and collective – body of experience without a hitch. They are highly thoughtful, but their sentience is incorporeal, with little trace of any strife in the achievement of their thought. In his lecture on Olson's *Maximus* poems, Prynne says:

> And the second *Maximus*, what it gives us is something so simple as homecoming. [...] Olson's poem could not be indefinitely extended. They tell me there is a great mass of further material. But I know for myself that the primary structure of this poem is already complete. And complete in two major movements: the going out, the asking the great questions, the making of the great statements: and the coming back, the coming back across the sea, the coming back through the ocean, coming back to the shore, and then the shore fades into a condition of land, and the condition of land approximates to the condition of the planet.[118]

Lyric is structured against this kind of range. Lyric doesn't go so far; lyric presses its sweet lips to the moment. So in one sense neither *Parkland* nor *Kazoo Dreamboats* is lyric: as Prynne says 'nothing in your lyric set-up will allow you to be at home on the earth.' At the same time, by

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[117] J. H. Prynne, 'Resistance and Difficulty', *Prospect*, 5 (Winter 1961), 26-30 (p. 26).

[118] 'On Maximus IV, V, VI', http://charlesolson.org/Files/Prynnelecture1.htm.

subsuming 'a' into 'the', by dissolving particularity into discursive and abstract generality, both these poems generate the quintessential condition of lyric, which is the solitude of the stationary, thinking, knowing 'I' before the brute mass of the world. It is in order to escape this, to escape lyric's inevitable burden of generalised subject-object relations, that Prynne wishes to remove the subject. And yet, the route out – contradiction – does not lead either to What There Is or to ethical seriousness, least of all to moral absolutes. This is because to remove the subject is to have 'clean hands', and as Prynne tells is in his essay, these do no worthwhile work. The absence of human particularity removes the opposing pole, the taut resisting counterforce, that would raise the poems' body of concern from the plane of argument to the plane of life: faithfulness to human particularity in depth and outline is what provides the very energy for protecting intrinsic contradiction in poetry: protecting it from *being* mere thought, and mere argument.

* * *

At the same time, there is a difference between a poem's thought, and the real-time process of thinking. Prynne's notion of 'poetic thought' begins with the latter but seeks to spread this process across language, so that it is language, rather than a thinker – reader or writer – that seems to be making the connections that generate the impression of 'thinking'.

I propose a somewhat different route for assessing the reality of *Kazoo Dreamboats*; one that leaves aside Prynne's claims to heroic moral duties or ethical seriousness in the pursuit of contradiction and the removal of the subject. I have argued that the removal of the subject vitiates such claims though the claims are founded on such removal.

In his 2014 booklet *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, Prynne writes:

> it is possible to consider the most ambitious forms of poetical invention to be those that enter into their own conceptual domain so completely as to transform this into its own free 'naturalism', where all is conceptualised and therefore nothing is, a 'possible world', where abstraction functions not as that which is abstracted from something else but as autonomous at levels of second-order meaning and interpretation; this meta-discourse practice is fully supported by the language medium because natural language itself is generically conceptualised in relation to 'what there is', whether 'real' or not, elastic in

> upward dimensionality, almost indefinitely so; and this is especially true of poetic discourse constructions.[119]

Prynne seems to be saying that because 'natural language' is already 'generically conceptualised', it somehow encourages a further complete conceptualisation. The entire history of imaginative literature in the English language, rooted in song and oral narrative and fixing its attention on the details and particulars of human life, contradicts this eccentric and highly expedient formulation. Nevertheless, what he is saying here, not least his reference to 'what there is', which curiously may refer to matters both real and not real, seems to offer a handle for approaching the 'reality' of *Kazoo Dreamboats*. The tendentiousness and expediency of Prynne's conceptions lead us back to this work, which does indeed posit a possible world that is entirely abstract. The question is, though 'all is conceptualised' there, is it then the case that 'therefore nothing is'?

I do not take Prynne to mean that this total conceptualisation leads to a kind of alchemy where concepts are somehow replaced by 'real' things. I take him to mean: when all is conceptualised, words cease referring merely to concepts. They begin to do other work. Prynne adds to his statements above as follows:

> Within such territory ... an arbitrary text-lexicon can be converted into a distinct vocabulary, and improvised rules for following a narrative or performance can be formulated [...] A reader may have a demanding task to interpret these 'rules', but the process may be exhilarating enough to carry the reader forward with strenuous delight: 'it must give pleasure'[120]

I have outlined what I take to be some of these 'rules' throughout this thesis. The task of interpreting them is, I can confirm, demanding. I also assent to the statement that 'the process may be exhilarating'. *Kazoo Dreamboats* does indeed give much pleasure; its abundant energies carry us forward with various kinds of delight, strenuous and unstrenuous. This is part of the work its words do when 'all is conceptualised'. And this delight is real because it is founded on something real.

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[119] J. H. Prynne, *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* (Cambridge: Critical Documents, 2014), p. 15.

[120] *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p. 15.

The poem's shifting tapestry of connections is the basis of its 'reality': the poem dramatises the very process of making connections, which in turn activates 'the possible'. It offers us the drama of thinking, in a duologue with the reader. It is infused with the exhilaration that connection-making brings; the thrill and wonder that a speculative relationship, between contradiction and matter and music and so on, might, actually, have some purchase, might, actually lead somewhere else. It is infused with the excitement of the 'might', more than the 'actually', of those connections. But that is its work: to congeal into the 'actually' would drain power from the 'might'. The poem keeps the two connected and taut without either winning out completely. The poem's language is a living stream of *potential* meaning; where connections can be made and thoughts recur and merge with other thoughts, which in turn recur and merge with others, all continuously modulating all others. In this way the poem offers us the excitement of feeling our own thinking as it brings various ideas into a rich and exciting dialectic, and this feeling is amplified by the further possibility that all these connections might really might be the case. The poem's ideas suggest words and those words suggest more ideas, and on it goes. That is the relation between word and concept where 'all is conceptualized and therefore nothing is'.

But the price of this 'reality' is ephemerality. *Kazoo Dreamboats* is among those poems that 'enter into their own conceptual domain so completely as to transform this into its own free "naturalism"'. This autonomous domain is so discontinuous with the physical domain of the reader – the maligned thinking subject – that its energies cannot readily cross the boundary. This is why Prynne's poetic commitment to an exterior human community, as he described it in 'The Poet's Imaginary', is no more than a dream. His poems offer their strenuous delight from within a self-enclosed domain of total, totalising conceptuality. Their delight is predicated upon the activity of connection-making, of collaborative thinking, and the reader's vivid apprehension of carrying out that thinking within the poem; but the feeling seems unable to survive the real-time reading of the poem. While we read we feel the intensity of the thinking process. When the poem ends, the feeling ends, the intensity ends. For such a distinct and strange work, *Kazoo Dreamboats* is, in a non-pejorative sense, extremely unmemorable. We do not emerge from our thinking with it with any 'thoughts', though we might remember the vague and strange excitement of being pleasurably baffled.

The flux of the poem's language, which channels the poem's excitement as it embodies the sphere of its mental potential, both imparts intensity and drains it away. In this restless flux of words, each phrase appears ephemerally before it's sucked back into the whorl: each phrase is converted into another link of a chain of modular repetitions. This is what makes the subtle

recurrence, the sense of overall pattern, powerful; at the same time it makes the words themselves, and the richer phrases which briefly rise above the flux, depthless: it robs them of resonance, the kind of resonance that could be caught and amplified by imagination. What is always to the fore is the connections themselves, rather than the things connected. The poem demands a set of complex and absorbing mental maneuvers, but has no imagination and makes no demands of the reader's. We think, when reading it, and *feel* our thinking; we do not imagine. There is no life in it to imagine, since the thinking in the poem does not lead to images of life. All is conceptualised, and therefore nothing is conceptualised; but also nothing is imagined or imaginable because...all is conceptualised. We cannot say of *Kazoo Dreamboats* what Prynne said of Herbert's 'Love ⁅III⁆', that it has found and defined 'its own way subsequently forward.' There is no 'forward' with *Kazoo Dreamboats*, not because the poem's possibilities end when the poem ends, but because its possibilities do not involve the subject, and it is the subject who goes forward, taking with it the life of the poem, when the poem ends. But the life of *Kazoo Dreamboats* can only occur within it, since its energies depend on a language that excludes the subject.

The poem's life, its reality, is the heat of mentation, this heat of feeling your mind not just making connections, but unlocking wonderful possibilities. In this heat everything begins to feel connected, not just the ideas that formed the original material and impulse for that mentation. It is the feeling of everything coming together, in rapt unity, aglow with intelligent light. This process, this heat, however, is so void of discernible content, so diffuse and exiguous in its inner form and parts and proportions, so empty of substance that it can be read back into the idea of nothing: here 'nothing' is an aspect of the excitement of knowledge, gained in the heat of mentation. The poem suggests the feeling of possessing this knowledge, the knowledge of nothing, which is everything. Therein lie its interests and defects. It appears, it busies us briefly, then it disappears. It leaves us with a vague notion, a vague feeling, perhaps a phrase here and there; some of these things rise above the flux. But the main point is the flux: the enormous amorphous energy of the poem, gathered around recurrences that make vivid connections while the poem lasts. It's an energy that stops when the poem stops. Like a dream.

This is because the reality of the poem in fact concentrates energy *in* the reader *as* a thinking subject, even as it removes the very ground of subjectivity that might allow the reader to focus this thinking into forms and images to be carried forward into life. For all his commitment to removing the subject, the essential energy of *Kazoo Dreamboats* in fact makes this subject an

indispensable protagonist. Which is as only much as to say that it depends on an intelligent open-minded reader, someone ready to really think.

Prynne chooses as an epigraph to *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* the definition of 'conception' from the 1658 dictionary of Edward Phillips, *The New World of English Words*: 'a conceiving with Childe, also a bringing forth any fancy or conceit.'[121] Is *Kazoo Dreamboats* a real thing, a child, or a mere fancy? For this marvelous and perplexing poem, the heat of mentation is real, a real child; but when the poem ends, we realise it was like a dream, something rich and strange, filled with tremendous fancy.

121 *Concepts and Conception in Poetry*, p. 3.