

## TENTER GROUND

*Poems*. J.H. Prynne. Fremantle Arts Centre Press (Western Australia) and Bloodaxe (UK). Distributed in the USA by Dufour, 2005.

*John Wilkinson*

When Devin Johnston reviewed for this journal an earlier issuance (to adopt its author's terminology) of J.H. Prynne's *Poems* in Summer 2000, he consciously was introducing the work of a writer "whose readership in the United States has been miniscule" but which "included a devoted following among experimental poets".<sup>1</sup> The situation had been little different in Prynne's native England, although the degree of obscurity needed to render a poet invisible is a nice judgement. Small press editions of Prynne's writing sold below the radar in quantities which would not have disgraced a major publishing house for any but school curriculum adopted texts. But the substantial Bloodaxe *Poems* (collecting all besides Prynne's relatively conservative first book)<sup>2</sup> obruded the name Prynne on pages hitherto closed or innocent, even a *TLS* reviewer asserting that 'Prynne presents a body of work of staggering audacity and authority such that the map of contemporary poetry already begins to look a little different'.<sup>3</sup>

This judgment was echoed by reviewers in several prominent journals; but it was Prynne's apparent canonization in the volume of *The Oxford English Literary History* devoted to the period 1960-2000 that sparked a media kafuffle in England, whereby harmless professors were invited by the press to offer views on whether his poetry was 'better' than the alternately sainted and demonized Philip Larkin's.<sup>4</sup> The only way for the practice of lyric poetry to be made comprehensible in media terms is to identify its sociological constituency; if this poetry wasn't identifiable as women's poetry, black poetry, Northern poetry or simply deranged (and professors would not be trapped into anything resembling a value judgment), then it had to be intellectual snobs' poetry. When other taxonomies falter, in England class caricature never fails.

In the forefront of such splenetic response were tenured professors of creative writing, furious at the effrontery of a writing seeming to disdain self-expression: surely this restraint evinced a superior attitude, both to ordinary humanity and to the expressive gift whose cultivation embodies resistance to all Bad Things—liberal economics, environmental devastation, child sexual abuse and unhealthy eating.<sup>5</sup> The politics of such a response are not inherently ignominious, despite the ironies of institutionally profitable

courses and prize-winning ambitions; and the new edition of *Poems* might serve to bring a set of political and poetical questions into sharper relief than Professor Don Paterson's animus could achieve. This is because the seven sequences added to *Poems* 2005 (six of them published previously as chap-books, and the first four collected as *Furtherance*, published in the United States by The Figures in 2004) include writing at once unfeasibly imbricated and politically vehement.<sup>6</sup> While Prynne's poetics differ fundamentally from those sometimes ascribed to American 'Language Poets', both face a dilemma of political instrumentality encapsulated by the American poet Chris Stroffolino in calling impishly for a political and artistic practice bridging John Prine (a blue-collar singer/songwriter) and J.H. Prynne. The age of theory had for some while seemed so decisively and convincingly to have displaced political engagement into textual and conference 'interventions', that artists in any media engaged in political (or 'cultural') struggle, notably feminist, felt driven into theoretical practice, a phrase revealed only slowly as an oxymoron.

The present climate amongst radical artists feels explosive with disgust, as before and during the First World War—even if the tactics of the Cabaret Voltaire must be discounted as the box of tricks of indulged pranksters like Damien Hirst. A reaction against the hedonistic prescriptions of the post-modern has seen a powerful revival of documentary film and led to audible talk of class and poverty even in the United States; but for those working in the modernist and post-theory context, a return to realism is not a credible option. The extent to which Prynne's recent poetry might propose a late modernist poetics of resistance to neo-colonialism outside its immediate curtilage is hard to predict, although the move of politically activist young Prynnyans in the UK into performance, promoted by the brilliant young theatre director and poet Chris Goode, marks a notable break with late modernist queasiness (especially in Cambridge) around personal display and publicity, and a determination to take highly challenging writing into the anti-war, anti-racist and anti-capitalist movements. In the same vein CDs have featured collaborations with avant-garde musicians working at the intersection of electronic dance music and improvised jazz.<sup>7</sup>

Such considerations are abetted by the appearance since the 1999 edition of *Poems* of high octane critical writing on Prynne, whose apogee has to be Kevin Nolan's 27,000 word internet essay 'Capital Calves'. Subtitled 'Undertaking an Overview', this is where all critical writing on Prynne must now start, and indeed it is tempting to suggest that any serious writing on contemporary poetics must deal with this astonishingly erudite (and infuriatingly unfootnoted and sloppily proofread) conspectus not just of Prynne's

formidable oeuvre, but of philosophical poetics through Longinus, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno and Levinas (to name a few).<sup>8</sup> Alongside Nolan's essay, a recent book by Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*, offers a provocative thesis on the persistence of a suppressed modernist lineage adhering to the arcane and sacred beyond those quarters where it is admitted (for instance in Robert Duncan), a provocation both supported and blunted by close reading and detailed scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Taken together with *Poems 2005*, these two critical texts assist in considering how Prynne's poetry (and that of younger British late modernist poets, notably Keston Sutherland) differs from Language Poetry, and the implications of such difference both for theoretical poetics and for the practice of writing poetry in the Haliburton age.

The questions raised by Mellors are closely akin to debates which have surfaced recently among reflective poets in the United States, for instance in a fascinating discussion of John Ashbery's work on *Silliman's Blog*.<sup>10</sup> How far have seemingly revolutionary modernist and postmodernist adventures in poetry really disavowed the romantic elevation of lyric poetry to a divine discourse? A couple of centuries of repeated proclamations of a break with ontology (Mellors cites imagism as the model instance) seem scarcely to have dispelled the numinous vapours attending any conception of poetry as a securely-fenced linguistic activity. Unless circuit-breakers and dampers are introduced with conscious ingenuity, poetry's obscurity and separateness resonate with those tantalizingly just-beyond-hearing echoes which Westerners find definitive of spirituality; anti-modernists like Don Paterson are right to detect an anti-humanistic and hieratical tendency in this tradition of transcendent un-transcendence.

Such questions acquire greater historical irony in the United States than in England, since every American child learns that once the cultural and religious elitist T.S. Eliot found his proper destination in foggy London and clouds of incense, the modernist home field was occupied by the rudely democratic descendents of William Carlos Williams. Even John Ashbery has come to be praised routinely for his 'democratic' love of Americana and of the ambient discourses which he so brilliantly (and a little too easily) turns into silk purses. In the United States, the contemporary reply to the anti-idealist challenge, is that American 'progressive' poetry has become democratically 'open', whether an open field or a jostling downtown.

Gerald L. Bruns' recent book *The Material of Poetry* exemplifies this faith, taking a cue from Lyn Hejinian's celebration of poetry's freeing from professors and elitists, and its potential for undermining *all* undemocratic and unnatural hierarchies—both Bruns and Hejinian seeming serious about

this potential.<sup>11</sup> Expatiating on Hejinian's 'The Rejection of Closure', Bruns writes: 'For Hejinian ... "open" means more than open ended, playful, aleatory, or nonlinear; it also means open to what is outside the poem. (Imagine a porous poem.) She writes: "The 'open text,' by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. ..."'<sup>12</sup>

The proposition that the open text 'speaks for writing' exposes the naïveté of this program; it is not so easy to avoid exercising authority, and the anti-hierarchical but unpublished writer may well question by what process of privileged selection *this* writer's demonstrations of relinquished control are packaged and distributed, to be further consolidated as authoritative texts through the attention of distinguished critics. She might also question whether *one* reader has ever been incited by such texts to engage in political action; this before examining the texts and considering their claims to 'openness'—sustainable only through quasi-Trotskyite imputations of false consciousness to the non-professional and baffled reader. On the other hand, the idea that a writer's 'relinquishing control' will remove the bad spell sustaining authority must count as magical thinking at its most liberated.

By a fortunate coincidence, Kevin Nolan in 'Capital Calves' seizes on the same essay by Hejinian: 'Writers like Lynn [sic] Hejinian can twitter on about the 'rejection of closure' all they need to, sweetly unaware that 'closure' is merely relocated intact from a textual component into a mirror image of the voluntarism that pre-selects it ('rejection').'<sup>13</sup> The contemptuousness of Nolan's phrasing should not obscure the serious point: if 'closure' or 'authority' are to mean anything besides minor stylistic choices for poets, if they are to bear any relation to the authority of Haliburton or KPMG or the Catholic Church or 'patriarchy' or the institution of Medicine or the State of Slovakia—then the notion that a poet can simply decide one day that she will abolish them, must be preposterous. In fact, *this* is a religious conviction, comparable to a conversion experience: suddenly everything looks different! And Bruns' lectures proceed to riff on the way in which certain uses of language can stimulate a reader or audience to question the ontological status of the linguistic work; this poetics of encounter is what he means by a 'philosophical poetics', and it is definitively postmodern.

But the forces at work in language cannot be reduced to this dismissible thing, 'closure', nor can the writer free herself with one bound from the

economic, social and linguistic orders within which she has negotiated her position during her development—*she can never be free and neither can any reader*. The historical irony is that the open text looks very like the would-be autonomous text, and appeals to exactly the same constituency; it is nothing but the would-be autonomous text in denial. Such denial makes for hectic runarounds and attention-grabbers—zany parody, stand-up routines, anything which might lure on board the charmingly innocent reader then whip the floor away from under her: now you try the trick on your own, my dear! To enlist poetry in energetic revolt can be rewarding; but revolt tends to precede a settling down—either the depressive reckoning with economic and social reality, or a persistence in childishness. The more strenuous the commitment to naïve conceptions of openness, the more conservative becomes the undertow, freighted with nostalgia for childhood and its romanticised freedoms.

By contrast, the interrogative resistance to the delusions of autonomy in selfhood and in poetic text conducted in Frank O'Hara's 'In Memory of My Feelings' and pursued in his later conversational poetry, resistant also to the consolations of childhood which are Ashbery's compulsive and career-long resort, remains an important precursor to Prynne's ferocious rebuttals of the desert temptations of freedom. Kevin Nolan's essay can be read as an admiring protest against the scorched-earth poetics which are O'Hara's surprising legacy in Prynne: 'But far from deploying poetry as the armature of a counter-Weberian strategy designed to pit 'institutional rationality' against a variety of literary estrangements, the very notion of autonomy itself has in Prynne's work become, increasingly, the site of attrition. [...] Yet the idea of autonomy may be ineradicable, not least because the dream of its eradication is the first evidence for its continuing presence amidst the debris of self evidence. [...] Some minimal and undiminished conception of autonomy is necessary if human personhood, even when relegated to authorship, is to continue, and for this to be ethically possible, some notion of resistance has remained formally central to much contemporary poetics besides Prynne's own.' Here Nolan alludes to radical poetry's role in resisting the systemic goal-orientation, the positivism exemplified in the Thatcherite proclamation and Blairite acceptance that There Is No Alternative to the rational interests of global capital, which individual fantasies of home-coming whether to God or to identity, serve merely to perpetuate. The danger lies in too comprehensive an articulation of the individual as the creature of ideological forces, a thoroughgoing deconstruction leaving the category of the human agent empty, a twitching puppet.

Nolan's protest is evoked especially by the seven books added to *Poems*

in the 2005 edition. I shall discuss two of these, and save discussion of *Triodes*, which I find the most gripping poetically, for another occasion. The first new book is *Red D Gypsum*, a text of thirty eight-line stanzas already the recipient of a critical analysis centring on the thematic of trekking.<sup>14</sup> This work takes its place in a lineage of Prynian anti-pastoral whose earliest full expression was *High Pink on Chrome* (1975), the titles announcing the affinity. Chemical treatments, plant breeding, genetic manipulation: these are the countryside pursuits of our day which *Red D Gypsum* hybridises with financial instruments, specifically the hedge funds of which Lillian Chew, source of the text's epigraph, is a theoretician—thus the appearance of 'ferox' in the final stanza nicely unites a cannibal trout (such trout grow to monstrous size) with the name of a hedge fund.

Hybridity, not subordination, is the mechanism at work here, and this also is the principle of the text's manufacture. To call *Red D Gypsum* a text is to respect its self-reflexive cluster of terms for textile—pasture becomes a rug, turf is reduced to fibre.<sup>15</sup> Even food can now be woven, the mycelial meat substitute Quorn being the best example. The dense weave of these stanzas is determinedly non-hierarchical in their plying of social, political, financial and scientific languages, but also formally their composition resolves into bands, strips and slats, with a modularly extended syntax whose sub-clauses or routines are often not clearly demarcated from the main clauses. With the exceptions of *Pearls That Were* and of *Triodes*, these new texts share certain characteristics with memory boards: that is, they consist of flat modules in non-hierarchical arrays, each intricately etched, polycentric and with switchable polarity. Such fretwork or mesh is the common term between textiles and electronics. For each text the stanzaic module is set and uniform, so in *Red D Gypsum* for instance, nine-beat lines compose eight-line stanzas.

Furthermore, the cadences of these texts are flattened. Consider the beginning and end points of the material added in *Poems 2005*, the first stanza of *Red D Gypsum* (1998) and the last stanza of *Blue Slides at Rest* (2004):

Now trek inter-plate reversion to earth buy out  
 as waters buried or get carrier up ready put  
 across gypsum branch effaced, as root planed  
 for don't now look to demand new birds in talent  
 from turf stripped to fibre. Rip brace out here  
 on the fringe reckless bestowing taint by the mart  
 chosen, tamper nickel token lunge to bite you may  
 cover down over, a flawless glucose shimmered sky.

*Poems 2005*, p435

Go down in earth like a feather, front brace. Left over  
 unrightful semblant will punish devoted machine knit  
 parapet. Nip and tuck miniature grounded so. Into this  
 world of darkness, of a kin deducted justified reprov'd  
 to end without, companion hooded unseen. Attempt thus  
 cut down as had never. Go with me. Within segment floss  
 honour bright missing, on foot. Ignorant paramount will  
 cadge a ride cranky dope appeal months and years, tell  
 in mish-mash certainty head to black on. Better broken  
 keep house yielding softly gnomonic cataract depressed  
 inwardly sent away. In care from hers avoidance transit  
 accept in strong wardship, order holding trace and lock.

*Poems 2005, p. 575*

Apart from the conventional abjuration ‘Go with me’, addressed to a ‘companion’ who is ‘unseen’ or ‘missing’ in the second piece, this is a writing almost without pronouns. Without pronouns the residual sense of autonomy viewed by Nolan as the last resort of human political agency, is all but extinguished. Pronouns also are the chief grammatical element around which poetic cadence is organised, as they are the figures of delivery and reception, of agency and of yielding. Fundamental emotional and psychic movements of give-and-take, projection-and-introjection, and sadism-and-depression, govern poetic cadence, and they are associated with the development of a sense of self (comprising both autonomy and managed dependence) through language. True, a pronoun is implicit as the object of the injunctive verbs which govern eight of the twelve sentences in the two pieces, and the reader can hardly avoid taking this personally. Although at first the injunctive impact feels like an unjust berating, within the poems’ weave the injunctions contribute to the sense of a world internally articulating through devices of devilish intricacy, or perhaps through computer programs—‘buy’, ‘get’ and ‘put’ being instructions in computerised market trading programs where decision-making cannot wait on human reflexes.

The absence of pronominal agency contributes to an almost robotic verse movement, further reinforced by the dominance of single-syllable verbs and nouns. This is ‘turf stripped to fibre’ in the earlier stanza, ‘machine knit’ in the book’s last. But single-syllable words are nodal in Prynne rather than essential; they are knots in the mesh’s reticulation. Thus ‘talent’ is linked to ‘nickel’ and ‘token’ in a financial node, as well as to desire or partiality—but these attributes of will can now be expressed only in terms which re-animate the King James biblical sense of ‘talent’ as coin. The word ‘brace’ as used in the first stanza not only refers to some kind of support, but evokes in connection with ‘waters buried’, ‘gypsum branch’ (gypsum leached

from fertiliser use), 'new birds', 'cover' and 'glucose shimmered sky', perhaps a rough shoot in a fen landscape, a living off the land now implicated with the language of commerce—'buy out', 'carrier', 'demand'. 'Lunge to bite' tightens these scenarios through a single phrase uniting the raptor with the corporate raider.

The reticulations of this verse knit the components of a flattened landscape and a short-pile universe. In *Red D Gypsum* a root is 'planed' and the sky's glucose contributes to the same economy as the fen's major crop of sugar beet. All activity occurs 'inter-plate' (surely a pun on 'interpolate'), the sardony of 'flawless' exacerbated in a space with neither floor nor ceiling, neither roots nor sky. 'Bestowing taint' becomes the prime human activity in this flattened world, once all disposition and structure ('brace') have been ripped out.

Readers of Prynne have come to expect the closing passages of his works to perform a gesture of recognition towards the still uncorrupted or the ethically habitable, to allow some horizon which if not transcendent (and even in *High Pink on Chrome* it can sound nearly so) offers a little breathing-space; and *Red D Gypsum* does end with 'vocal folds glowing deep unwinding', a space reminiscent of late Beckett but whose intense lyricism reconfigures flattened nature into a habitable room: 'Vivid strips | of tree bark circle the room'.<sup>16</sup> Although the tone of *Blue Slides at Rest* is almost vernal after the spoliations of *Red D Gypsum*, the closing passage cited above insists on its 'machine knit' in a flurry of puns—'left over | unrightful', 'nip and tuck'—and the room in which it comes to rest seems like a resort to maternal care, the only companion into the 'world of darkness' being the internalised *holding* structure which the poem has gathered from the 'paramount' she who oversees the poem.

Here then is the notable exception to the pronominal dearth in late Prynne: female pronouns dominate *Blue Slides at Rest* and *Triodes* as they did *Her Weasels Wild Returning* (1994), and the worlds of these poems are structured (or 'braced') by paramount women, there being no explicitly responsive male principle unless the entire texture of corruption is to be gendered as male (or has been male-engendered). The She of *Triodes* is Pandora, a Pandora whose political hopes are blocked at every turn in a Game Theory nightmare where state terror and the freelance terrorism of the dispossessed (for the setting is Palestine) have etched all possible pathways; while Nolan argues persuasively for the She of *Her Weasels Wild Returning* as a Penelope awaiting 'a bloody new antistrophe in the history of conquest, marital and martial.' The maternal presiding over *Blue Slides at Rest* permits a lyric inflection which rides an almost prelapsarian landscape (although what crosses

the placenta can be fearful): strikingly, ‘Downy finish is | hers to ask after, the swan’s road into Palestine not | yet level.’<sup>17</sup> When Prynne read this poem at the first Pearl River Poetry Conference in Guangzhou, China in July 2005, he instructed the audience to close their eyes and to regard each word as a pinprick of light in a black screen, switched on and extinguished.

It is hard to reconcile such an instruction with the poem’s ‘machine knit’ of pre-birth, birth and early infant activity, with its still-insistent hybridity:

Care taken, took into by a glance. Her hair loosened,  
cheek more red, plasma lactic acid dropping utter spread  
like raid to her knee, so freely downwards. Entranced  
restricted cub in this tunnel, lissom case notes asperge  
crevice woeful did they either.

*Poems 2005*, p. 573

The connections are tightly plied between bodily and linguistic processes (‘lissom case notes asperge’), and the child to which the poem adverts is no untrammelled sprite but a nipple-chewing Kleinian awaiting the language to propel him into his inheritance of hormones, gasoline and shamefulness. Still, the suggestion is that death can be—indeed, can *only* be—endured as a prospect through the deep but occluded psychic structure precipitated from the mother/child dyad and its intramural exchanges. This psychic chamber may also resound in response to particular poetic cadences, and even the most compressed of late Prynne poetic texts are rife with bitten-off and damped-down memories of earlier writing whose cadences felt deeply compelled. These residual, highly individual resources, which may be immune or at least resistant to contamination but are more likely to have become inaccessible to many who have been flattened in the most forceful vernacular sense, re-pose the political question: how are such resources to be made available politically, collectively?

The celebration of the ‘open’ too often welcomes back the transcendent via the cult of ‘the body’ as the home of authenticity, performing a manoeuvre now familiar on the post-modernist terrain, by re-installing pre-linguistic voice (expressed for Bruns in sound poetry) to summon the world back into substantial being. As often, Artaud provides the avant-gardist with a licence for such recidivism, but the logic is impeccable once the phenomenology of the encounter becomes the organising principle in the media welter, and Bruns’ position is consistent. The abstraction of financial flows, signed off in automated trading, accompanied the rise of minimalist art: at a certain point of complexity, management becomes more important

than the manifest of goods. The more 'theoretical' its 'concerns', the more art relies on the encounter—no longer is the viewer the connoisseur or the would-be home decorator, but she asks: what are the designs of this object on me, what is it doing here, and how am I supposed to respond? Just so the open text becomes an *environment* within which the reader performs her free response, in a zero-gravity space of indifference, a Buddhist world where designing languages have been neutralized. All is at play. Only the suffering body's screams, grunts, ecstatic yells and groans rip open the veil of appearances. Given every toy money can buy, the Western child throws tantrums and expects praise for them.

Prynne's attack on body sentimentality has been remorseless, starting with *Wound Response* (1974). Like William S. Burroughs, he conceives of the body as soft machinery and biochemistry interspersing silicon and soil and gabble. Hence, as Nolan contends, there can be no 'home' to which Penelope can return. Indeed Nolan argues that a writing which from the start has refused such home consolations, basing its claims on an ethics of responsiveness, rather than the usual politics of representation attended by elegiacs for the loss of presence, necessarily was driven to seek an autonomy whose relation to experience then became principally one of shame. How could it be otherwise? Whatever autonomy poetry secures or claims, shames the author complicit with the historical and material conditions required for such relative independence; and whatever distance from corrupt discourse is asserted by the lyric text, its embedded cadences, its connective tissues, have been cultured in the factories of the human genome project—and patented for use. For Nolan, Prynne's late writing has fallen into an impasse of autoimmune struggle whereby the stuff from which it spins its network of resistance, is the very stuff which threatens its putative integrity; every agent has been 'turned' in advance.

This is the autoimmune dynamic. The system always threatens to eat itself; but how preferable is this risk to the nostalgia which has poets of oppressed ethnicities casting their laments for the homes to which they were never admitted, into the trophies of 'diversity' that *The New Yorker* admits to interleave the elegiac poetics of advertisements for sports cars doomed to queue at freeway toll booths? Here is a galloping consumption indeed.

Does *Blue Slides at Rest* offer a way out of Prynne's impasse? Only at the personal and poetic level, only by side-stepping the pileup which has preceded it. What are the alternatives presented by contemporary poetry in English, that is poetry which takes its poetic vocation seriously, more than the creation of pretty baubles? The alternative impasse of open poetry has been spelled out: it is based on an ahistorical and childish fantasy,

destined to revert to the body or to metaphysics. Happily it practiced what it preached only for one historical moment and then fitfully, so now a pleasure of reading Lyn Hejinian's poetry is its 'chatty asides, exclamations, digressions, gossip, confidences (all bedside mannerisms)', as that of reading Charles Bernstein's is its elatingly improvisational wit.<sup>18</sup> Such poise and charisma permit a continuing independence from the blights of spirituality and empathy; but the poetry attracts for the kind of qualities admired in *people*, and it surely must be troubling that what still is known academically as Language Poetry has found an audience through the attractiveness of its authors' personalities. But then, the politics of this poetry always had licensed the poet to do exactly what he or she liked.

By strict contrast, the politics of Prynne's poetry have afforded him little room for manoeuvre. A reader who can bear an unremittingly clear-sighted exposition of the full ethical and political implications of Western citizenship at the turn of the millennium has nowhere else to look: for at every other turn, issue politics offers its implicit and pitiful assurance that *once* equal opportunities are real, *once* animals are no longer slaughtered, *once* the carbon economy is replaced by a sustainable way of life, humankind will be back on track—even if most activists recognise they are engaged in a struggle without end. But after all, these are not separable ambitions. There is no imaginable version of contemporary British or American society which would not depend on organised exploitation. The very texture of Prynne's recent poetry is manufactured from these double and triple-binds, and outrageously the fabrications can be beautiful. But what then? *Blue Slides at Rest* feels like a revision of *Into the Day* (1972), an earlier birth song where 'the compounded blood | and light makes lustre swerve in the dream', but now seeking any interstice for 'the natural child' in the fabric of comprehensive corruption, even if only the grave. What if when you open your eyes, the lights have gone out?

## NOTES

1. Devin Johnston, 'Prynne's Poems', *Notre Dame Review* 10, Summer 2000, downloadable from the *Notre Dame Review* website.

2. Although in both British and US reviews this edition is universally credited to Bloodaxe Books, a UK publisher, the primary publisher of both editions is Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Western Australia. As for sales, the first edition of *Poems* (1999) sold 2028 paperback and 341 hardback. This figure excludes sales made by Fremantle in Australia. Once it had sold out, the book was unavailable for

some time because the Bloodaxe contract was for one printing only. However, while the author was not willing to agree to a reprint, he was willing to allow an enlarged second edition to be published later. For this second edition under review (2005), the Bloodaxe contract permits them to print 3000 copies in paperback and 500 in hardback, and they may reprint a further 3000 paperbacks. Thanks to Neil Astley of Bloodaxe for this information.

3. As quoted, unsurprisingly, on the Bloodaxe webpage devoted to the new edition.

4. Ed Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England? The Oxford English Literary History Volume 12 1960-2000*, OUP 2004. The spat can be followed through a series of articles accessible via the Books section of *The Guardian's* website (<http://books.guardian.co.uk>) by typing in the search term 'Prynne'.

5. The representative figure here, excoriating the 'postmodernists' and 'academic' poets on behalf of a conference of the comfortably tenured and subsidised, is Don Paterson. Andrea Brady's article 'Meagrely Provided' (*Chicago Review* 49:3/4 & 50:1, Summer 2004, pp396-402) has his measure, and how! The following issue (*Chicago Review* 50:2/3/4, Winter 2004/5, pp377-379) contains a thoughtful letter from Andrew Duncan reviewing the politics and sociology of this poetry war.

6. The style 'Poems 2005' is adopted throughout to prevent confusion with the two earlier books by J.H. Prynne entitled 'Poems': *Poems*, Agneau 2, Edinburgh & London 1982, and *Poems* 1999.

7. For instance those issued by QUID magazine: see [http://www.geocities.com/barque\\_press/quidcd.html](http://www.geocities.com/barque_press/quidcd.html)

8. Kevin Nolan, 'Capital Calves: Undertaking an Overview', *Jacket* 24, <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/24/nolan.html>

9. Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics from Pound to Prynne*, Manchester University Press 2005.

10. <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>, with no competitor for the most tireless, constantly intelligent and provocative English language poetry blog.

11. Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics*, University of Georgia Press 2005.

12. Bruns p29.

13. There is a real problem in referencing lengthy internet texts with no internal divisions. The only way to find passages in 'Capital Calves' is to use a browser's search function.

14. Jay Basu, 'The Red Shift. Trekking J. H. Prynne's *Red D Gypsum*,' *The Cambridge Quarterly* Vol.30, No 1, 2001, pp19-36.

15. The dedication of the *Furtherance* collection, opened by *Red D Gypsum*, is to Marjorie Welsh, author of *Begetting Textile* (Equipage, Cambridge 2000).

16. The signal exception to the redemptive tone of the Prynneian closing stage comes at the end of the utterly bleak *Down where changed* (1979), whose parting tribute to hospital food is 'stuff it'.

17. *Poems* 2005, p572.

18. The line is from Lyn Hejinian, *A Border Comedy*, Granary Books, NYC 2001, p127.