J.H. PRYNNE'S "THE CORN BURNED BY SYRIUS"

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TEXTUAL NOTE

"The Corn Burned by Syrius" is the final poem in Prynne's third collection *The White Stones* (Lincoln: Grosseteste, 1969), p. 96. One textual change was made to the poem for its publication in Prynne's collected *Poems* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press; Tarset: Bloodaxe, 1999; 2nd edn. 2005) on p. 126: 'the dis-' is changed to 'then dis-' (l. 21). I have based my reading on this last published text.

§ 1. Boethius

The title of the poem derives from the *Philosophiae Consolationis*, a work of poetry and prose by the sixth-century philosopher and Roman consul to the Ostrogothic empire, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius.[1] The *Consolation of Philosophy* was written some time in the early 520s CE in a cell in Ticinum (modern day Pavia in northern Italy) after Boethius' imprisonment by the Ostrogothic king Theodoric on charges of treason, and conspiracy with the Eastern Christian church. The *Consolation* is in part an account of devotional and personal sufferings; it is also an account of the process of their overcoming. Boethius is consoled by discursive reconciliation with classical Philosophy, who appears personified as a woman in his cell, and over the course of the *Consolation* he is aided by this interlocutor toward an exalted reaffirmation of her doctrines. The anonymous 1609 English translation which lies behind Prynne's text consists, as does the Latin original, of five books, each containing a varying

[1] Boetius, Anitius Manlius Torquatus Severinus, *Five Bookes, of Philosophicall Comfort, Full of Christian Consolation, Written a 1000. Yeeres Since*, trans. by I. T. (London: printed by John Windet, for Mathew Lownes, 1609), fol.17^{r}.

number of alternate verse and prose passages. The title of "The Corn Burned by Syrius" contains an unmarked reference to the following lines: "and *Syrius* burnes that corne, | With which *Arcturus* did the earth adorne" (fol. 17^{v}). The text of the *Consolation* is further quoted in l. 13-15 (see § 7, below).

§ 1.1 "Corn"

It is most likely that the "Corn" referred to both in the title and in the *Consolation* is the cereal crop, wheat (botanic name *Triticum*). While it is certain that wheat was a staple in classical antiquity, and the Roman Empire has even been called, though exaggeratedly, a "wheat empire", the crop has a wider significance in Prynne's poem.[2] G. D. H. Bell confirms that:

> the origin of the cereals of the north temperate regions, and their evolution and development in cultivation, are of the utmost interest and significance because of the intimate association of botanical evolution with the socio-logical development of man and the processes of civilization over a considerable area of the earth's surface. It is generally recognized that the domestication of the two 'primary' cereals, wheat and barley, was an essential feature of the oldest civilizations that are known. […] There is, in cereals, one very important common denominator, namely that a sequence is perceptible from forms possessing primitive characters, or 'wild' characters, usually associated with seed dispersal or dissemination, to the specialized characters required for civilization. These, in general terms, are the inflorescence or spikelet characters of rachis fragility, spikelet articulation, awn development, basal spikelet soil-boring modifications, hairiness, and small grain size.[3]

[2] See Naum Jasny, *The Wheats of Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1944), p. 14.

[3] G. D. H. Bell, 'The Comparative Phylogeny of the Temperate Cereals' in *Essays on Crop Plant Evolution*, ed. by John Hutchinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 70-102 (pp. 70-72).

All wild forms of wheat are hulled, that is, the cereal ear has a tough husk enclosing the grain, and the grouping of husks, known as the spikelet, disarticulates from the weak central stalk, or the rachis, at maturity. Naked or free-threshing wheat forms evolved in the early Neolithic period under cultivation into a crop that is practically the inversion of its primitive ancestor: the spikelets do not disarticulate from a now tough rachis, and the grains have light husks that facilitate the milling process. This cultivated character of wheat, its inability to seed, disperse and so displace and propagate itself without husbandry is expressive of a reciprocal relation: the domestication of this cereal was largely reliant upon human localization and domestication, the gradual fixing of a structure of social and economic life centred on the agrarian settlement and the hoarding of grain. This localized agrarian condition and its relation with corn, stellar and divine influence is also important for the *Consolation* and features in turn among its background cultural sources (see §9, below).

The meanings of "Corn" also connect with the poem's interest both in the forms and the underlying organisations of economic transactions. Grain and money are both stores of value, yet their particular conditions of the extraction and abstraction of value are markedly different, regardless of their fungibility. While practically all modern currency in the west has value only by fiat as a medium of exchange, grain's value is finally unmediated in satisfying the primary need of sustenance. According to A. H. Quiggin: "grain has been used instead of money from the earliest times to the present day. So we hear of corn in Egypt, barley in Babylon, millet in the Sudan, maize in Mexico, wheat and rice in India and China, which have been and still are used in place of money. […] The main purpose of grain is, however, to provide food, not wealth, and in spite of its excellence as a money-substitute, its use must be seen as a form of barter than of money."[4]

[4] *The Story of Money* (London: Methuen, 1956), pp. 12-13.

§ 1.2 "Syrius"

A star of unparalleled magnitude in the constellation of Canis Major or the Great Dog, Sirius is nine times more brilliant than the standard first magnitude star, and around 23 times the magnitude of the Sun.[5] Its status as a supreme star of religious, mythological and cosmological significance in many ancient cultures and civilizations is variously documented.[6] For the ancient Egyptians, the appearance above the eastern horizon at dawn (the heliacal rising) of the star they knew as *Sopdet*, heralded the annual flooding of the Nile, and so initiated the onset of the annual sowing and harvesting of crops. Richard A. Parker points out that "the star most important to the Egyptians, [was] Sirius, or Sothis, as the Greeks rendered its Egyptian name" and its heliacal rising was taken as the first day of the proto-dynastic era's lunar calendar; it remained so in the later civil or schematic lunar calendar, whose refinement was dependent upon the highly developed agrarian economy and cultural life of the later dynastic Nile kingdoms.[7]

In ancient Greece the heliacal rising of Sirius coincided with the intense midsummer heat that ripened the crops, hence its classical Greek name *Seirios*, meaning 'glowing one' or 'the scorcher'.[8] Its heat-laden fierceness was considered an aspect of the star's malign influence which brought about periods of inactivity and stupor, often parching grain and farmer alike, and maddening dogs (hence its alternative name of the Dog-Star, giving rise to the 'dog days' of summer). Agricultural activities were initiated according to the appearance of the star: in his didactic poem, *Works and Days*, Hesiod advises his idle brother that "when Orion and Sirius are come into

[5] See Robert Burnham, *Burnham's Celestial Handbook: An Observer's Guide to the Universe Beyond the Solar System*, 3 vols, rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1978; vols 1-2 first publ. Flagstaff; Arizona: Celestial Handbooks, 1966), I: *Andromeda-Cetus*, p. 389.

[6] See for instance Jay B. Holberg, *Sirius: Brightest Diamond in the Night Sky* (Chichester: Praxis, 2007), pp. 3-26.

[7] Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 7.

[8] See Lidell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th edn. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1889).

the mid-heaven, and rosy-fingered Dawn sees Arcturus, then cut off all the grape-clusters, Perses, and bring them home."[9]

The *Astronomica* of the Augustan writer Marcus Manilius, a catalogue of the stars in verse, derived both from astrological precepts and astronomical knowledge, suggests the extent to which the star was equally invested with diverse powers of augury and influence, both benign and malign, in the Roman world. It is worth noting at this point that Prynne certainly knew the *Astronomica*, quoting from what appears to be his own translation of l.118-121 from Book I in a short explanatory note in *The English Intelligencer* on his own poem "The Wound, Day and Night", also from *The White Stones* (for more on Prynne and Manilius, see §9, below).[10] Manilius devotes several lines to the magisterial power of Sirius (as the Dog Star). In the 1697 verse translation of the *Astronomica* by Thomas Creech we read that:

> Next barks the *Dog*, and from his Nature flow
> The Most afflicting Powers that rule below,
> *Heat* burns his *Rise*, *Frost* chills his setting *Beams*,
> And vex the World with opposite Extremes.
> He keeps his Course, nor from the Sun retreats,
> Now bringing Frost, and now encreasing Heats:
> Those that from *Taurus* view this rising Star,
> Guess thence the following state of Peace and War,
> Health, Plagues, a fruitfull or barren Year.
> He makes shrill Trumpets sound, and frightens
> Then calms and binds up *Iron War* in Ease. (Peace,
> As he determines, so the Causes draw,
> His *Aspect* is the World's supremest Law.
> This Power proceeds from the vast Orb He runs,
> His Brightness equals or exceeds the Sun's.[11]

[9] *Works and Days* in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. by Hugh Evelyn-White (London: Heinemann; Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), l. 609-611, p. 49.

[10] See "A Communication" in *The English Intelligencer*, (Series II, 1965), p. 27.

[11] *The Five Books of M. Manilius, Containing a System of the Ancient Astronomy and Astrology, Together with the Philosophy of the Stoicks* (London: Tonson, 1697), I, p. 17.

In the eighteenth century the astronomer Edmund Halley discovered from his studies of an ancient astronomical catalogue, known as the *Algamest*, that Sirius (and Arcturus, the brightest star in the constellation of Boötes, the Herdsman) had shifted significantly over the several centuries since the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy compiled the catalogue around 145 CE. This discovery of the motion of stars over time owing to their "proper motion," the term now used for stellar drift, was of immense philosophical and scientific import. Astronomy could show that the heavens were not composed of fixed stars and mobile planets (named from the Greek *planetos*, 'wanderer') but that celestial bodies were all in constant motion. In the early 1840s the German astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Bessel attempted to determine the proper motion of Sirius in order to establish a fixed celestial frame of reference from which to work out the coordinates of all stars. He found significant aberrations in Sirius' proper motion, as if it were being tugged from its course. Bessel conjectured that the gravitational effects of the unseen mass of a companion star, not visible to the naked eye or through the magnification of any telescopes then available, could account for such perturbations. His guess was proven in 1862 by observation: Sirius' companion star was first seen by the son of American telescope maker Alvan Clark. The two stars are now studied as a binary system composed of Sirius A (our Sirius), a high magnitude white main sequence star, and Sirius B, a faint white dwarf, its companion.

§ 1.3 "The Corn Burned by Syrius"

The connection between the poem's title and the passage in Boethius' *Consolation* to which it alludes can be read in light of the ways in which Sirius has been conceived according to need and preference over the centuries. The star's mantic, divinatory value waned in the west through successive shifts in cosmological purview: the ongoing development of a rational, practical system of astronomy, and the fact of its own proper motion, diminishing its eminence and accuracy as a calendric or seasonal marker.[12] The epistemological ambit of Sirius

[12] See for example A. Pannekoek, *A History of Astronomy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), pp. 82-85, for a discussion of the effect of Sirius' proper

altered; the discourses in which it was meaningful, and their historical transformations, can be traced across the title and throughout its source, and further through the poem's routines of movement and entropy considered below.[13] The retention in the title of the variant, though historically legitimate, spelling of the star's name – philologically associating it with an identifiable translation of the *Consolation* – acts as a consequential link to the classical model of divine stellar influence from which that book proceeds, and which is its means of consolation, as well as to that version's various pertinent glosses. Not "*Syrius* burnes that corne," but "The Corn Burned by Syrius": the star no longer explicitly and actively "burnes that corne" as it does in the *Consolation*: the corn is burned by Syrius. These differences in word-order and tense disclose disruptions held within the poem's title and its background: the historic conflict between a worldview attributing mysterious power to the stars, and another in which stellar bodies, scientifically indexed by the astronomer's powers of observation, are divested of any such prophetic significance. The syntactical switch between Syrius and the corn is a gesture toward that altered positional fixity of the star, its change in status and location (a necessary corollary here). The star is transferred to the active substantive while the corn takes the head, and this precedence is the first intimation of the poem's attention to the wane of agriculture celestially guided. Still, the title offers, in its philological aspect, a backward reach to when Sirius was one of the *stellae fixae*, which appeared in the sky in the height of summer, and was substantively, 'the scorcher'.

§ 2

1 Leave it with the slender distraction, again this
2 is the city shaken down to its weakness. Washed-out

motion on the Egyptian Sothic calendar and agrarian practices and the loss of its annunciatory value.

[13] The contextual remit here is western. There is much written on the place of the star in the cosmology of the Dogon tribe of west Africa. Controversy surrounds the tribe's seemingly impossible knowledge of Sirius and its companion invisible to the naked eye, brought to light by two anthropologists in the 1950s. See for example Noah Brosch, *Sirius Matters* (Dordrecht; London: Springer, 2008), pp. 60-69.

3 green so close to virtue in the early morning,
4 than which for the curving round to home this
5 is the fervent companion.

§ 2.1 "the slender distraction"

If the impersonal pronoun of the first line of the poem refers to "the city" in the second line, the putative act of leaving "it" might occasion the disturbance of a discomposing wrench of both mind and body. The imperative itself is contrary or divisive: a tonally subdued injunction both to leave the "slender distraction" behind in the city upon exit, and to leave the city in possession of it (that is "leave" such discomposure behind). No simple choice between one and the other seems possible within this opening frame. The "slender distraction" has apparent and figurative breadth, though thin in its own dimension, giving shape and quality to the current diversion of the poem's speaking voice: the interstice between the anchoring condition of the city, a movement out and away to elsewhere, also brings into subtle form the sensations produced by such a potentially exilic thrust. This word "distraction" might be trivial or slight, but its Latin root from *distractio* or *distraho*, the action of tearing apart, tugging or pulling away, gives to the phrase the minatory edge of an enforced estrangement behind the imperative mood of the poem's opening (but see § 6.1, below).

§ 2.2 "the city"

This is the first of the poem's two references to "the city": in both cases it is allied to weakness, and to localized movement, where violent calamitous down-fall and expiration are couched in terms of parasympathetic movement ("shaken" here; "quivers" in l. 7; "twitching" in l. 22). The meaning of the city's implied or potential collapse "down to its weakness" might rest upon the complex of the city taken as physical and mental construct, one that has been recurrently breached but only partially destroyed. A distinction between the physical city and the body politic is implicit here, and the Latin roots of the words *city* and *urban* disclose what the weakness of the city might be. Yi-Fu Tuan has written that "since antiquity the city has had two principle meanings in the West: human relationships (civitas) and built forms (urbs). For a long time the former was

dominant."[14] There is then a nexus of possibilities that lies at the root of this initiating imperative to leave "the city". To what extent does it remain or hold good as a place or originating point, and to what extent can one "leave it"? The citizen who leaves the *civitas* fragments the collective body; the confection of the built city and the body politic realises a site of acute difficulties. Can the philosophical edifice, the *civic*, fall down, and can we quit the idea of the city as a condition of existence rather than just leave it behind? We say that the urban is built-up and can be 'shaken down' but the city as a social condition is predicated upon an inner substructure of feeling and decision towards our outer environs. The sense of quiet dolour of the poem's opening due to the impending exilic exit is subsumed as "the city" is subsumed in the mind that can suffer such a physically shaped "distraction". Even in that dolour is embedded the subtle phonic allowance of *a gain this*, since the line break leaves the phrase to stand alone in the line and grants the alternate homophonous possibility, so there is potential loss as there is a potential gain in the exilic compulsion outward from this urban condition and inner structuring.

§ 2.3 "Washed-out | green"

The connection between "the city" and "green", important throughout the poem, is initiated here. Green's chromatic significance for the poem's stance toward the city is felt through its ramifications in the language. "Virtue" has in it already a trace of green in "vert", is "close to" it phonically and physically along the line. But the trace though distinct is not strong: the initiating hue is of "washed-out | green", at once minutely localized and diffused, the "green" displaced across the line-break; a concentration gradient, or even a chromatographic purification, implied in the act of washing out.[15] The condition of wandering bereft from expectation of "curving round to home" is invested with some anxiety, stemming from this sense of dispersion from source, that is, from being irrevocably "washed-out". The phrase begins with the difficult agglomeration of

[14] "The City as a Moral Universe," *Geographical Review* 78 (1988), 316-324 (p. 316).

[15] See for instance *Chromatography*, ed. by Erich Heftmann (New York: Reinhold; London: Chapman & Hall, 1961), pp. 11-13.

"than which for", a glut of possible links. This is washed-out grammar: perhaps a pressurized screening of the negative or pessimistic attitude to the possible or desirable arc to home, or the attainment of virtue in that curvature.

§ 2.4 "the early morning"

The time of day, the early morning, might alert us to the heliacal rising of Sirius and, read in this aspect, the "fervent companion" could be its companion star, Sirius B. The "fervent" attitude of this companion is both passionate and glowing-hot (Latin = *fervere*, to boil or glow). Sirius' companion star has lost its light-emitting resources through its evolution from main sequence star, to red giant to white dwarf, entailing its present state of invisibility to the naked eye. The orbital movement of Sirius B is visible in the disturbed path of Sirius A, however, a kind of motion by proxy. The relative movement, the proper motion, of these stars, their continually drifting points of origin, describes the difficulty of location attendant upon a nomadic or exilic frame of reference. It might be that Sirius A is the glowing one, our fervent yet shifting companion, the significance of whose own continually displaced celestial curve "round to home" has erased its power to govern earthly movements (e.g. when to sow and reap).

§ 3

5 The raised bank by
6 the river, maximum veritas, now we have no
7 other thing.

§ 3.1 "The raised bank"

In spite of this scenic alteration, it is not clear that any initial sortie has been made. The riverside setting flows on from "washed-out" in l. 2; the diffusion gradient of "green" in that line corresponds to this one-way current. It is not certain whether the river has been a means, a fluvial path, out of the city. The choice of line-break between l. 5 and 6, directly after the preposition, is then a significant positional interruption. The "raised bank" is set back and apart from the river; and the separation formally initiates our encounter with the poem's

economic and agrarian lexis, where "bank" may be read as a monetary establishment or a grain store. *The City*, used as a metonym for London's banking or financial district, is now available and pertinent in this linguistic array. The homophonic 'razed bank' recalls the shaking of "the city" in l. 2. Simultaneity of scale is present in this homophonic pairing: the bank is made higher *and* levelled to the ground in a collapsed scale, at once both high and low.

§ 3.2 "maximum veritas"

The Latin word "veritas" has several senses: "the state of being real, actuality"; "the true nature (of a thing)"; "the real or actual value"; "the quality or fact of being in accordance with fact, truth"; "that which is in conformity with fact, the truth."[16] Conferred upon the "raised bank", which holds an impossible simultaneity of scale, is the status of highest truth and actuality. Despite the present lack of alternative to this state ("no | other thing"), all actual highest value stemming from accrued material wealth, this "maximum" surely or hopefully functions only virtually, not actually: it is highest by virtue of the missing end of the scale, by missing such a comparison to confirm the superlative. In a Roman context, veritas and virtue are closely related, a relation typical of classical divine inbreeding: Veritas is the personal virtue of truthfulness, and its personification, the Goddess *Veritas*, is the mother of Virtue. This loop of virtue, truth and value, as a function of maximum reality, becomes a predicament of its own incestuous nomination by this term. Can there only be the highest or greatest when such adjectival quantity reasserts and relies on the specifically absent end of the scale?

§ 4

7 A small red disc quivers in the street,
8 we watch our conscious needs swing into this point
9 and vanish; that it is more cannot be found, no
10 feature, where else could we go. The distraction
11 is almost empty, taken up with nothing;

[16] *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. by P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

§ 4.1 "A small red disc"

Another focal shift is made, onto the street from the (river, corn, money) bank that seems to be an onward step, although another imperative might be met with: a red traffic light in the image of the "small red disc" has just quivered on. Allusions to monetary value in the preceding lines could render the "small red disc" the flattened circular face of a coin, and from its colour a coin of low denomination, copper or bronze. The colour red might also signify debt or financial loss. The disc where "our conscious needs" are seen disappearing shrinks to an imaginative point where value and devalue are condensed; the coin is spent, a definite monetary loss. This interrupted "swing" then falls short of the already uncertain motion of "curving round to home" in l. 4, rendering it an incomplete curvature, a "swing" with no oscillation, no promise of return backward or homeward. "Needs" consciously sought are absorbed into this diminishing disc, yet there is no exchange here, nothing redeemed, no return (of motion or profit) available. While there was "no | other thing" than the "maximum veritas" of the bank, here needful things have vanished, and by fruitless search there are "no more". Conditions of motive impasse, negative balance and lack make up this anti-locus, which inheres as a formless distant focus, a vanishing perspective point, which is nonetheless the required destination since there is no other elsewhere.

§ 4.2 "The distraction | is almost empty, taken up with nothing"

By now the "distraction" has lost its slenderness. Although the emptiness implies some diminished affect, an emotional hollowing-out in response to the deferred but necessary exit from the city, this emptying nonetheless occasions an influx of "nothing" into that hollow. In this way, the 'distraction' seems to keep some formal integrity, a manner of presence, as it loses its slightness, its triviality. The same interval remains between settlement and outward passage in this voiding, yet represented in this vacuous take-up is a distinct reversal: increasing entropy and obliteration flip over to decreasing entropy and the increase of nothingness. This reversal is a significant routine replicated through the poem, configuring the stellar, agrarian and economic aspects accumulated so far through its interlaced lexical currents and the philological gambit of its title. While there is reversal

there is also again the sense of uprooting carried, the crops "taken up", and also the stellar which is immediately nullified in its emptiness.

§ 4.3 "disc"

With Boethius' *Consolation* as background source for the poem, this reversal might relate to Fortune. As a genre the consolation often contains an exposition of the Goddess of Fortune, which is meant to assuage and recondition the addressee's attitude to Fortune's apparent withdrawal of favour, as much as to harden the indifference of the unconsoled towards Her.[17] In the paired Prose and Verse V of the *Consolation*'s Book I, from which both the title and the quotation in l. 13-15 are drawn, Philosophy describes how Boethius' "sorrow raged against fortune and thou complaynedst, that deserts were not equally rewarded" (fol. 19^{v}). The *Consolation* promulgates the figure of the Wheel of Fortune, or the *Rota Fortuna*, which has its roots in the religious symbolism of Roman antiquity. As John Ferguson notes: "the chief symbol of Fortune is the wheel and she stands unstably upon it."[18] Fortune steps forward and describes her method in the second book of the *Consolation*:

> I turn about my wheele with speed, and take a pleasure to turne things upside down; Ascend, if thou wilt, but with this condition, that thou thinkest it not an iniurie to descend, when the course of my sport so requireth. (fol. 28^{v})

Her wheel turns: one's ascent to good fortune means another's descent to bad. In answer to Boethius' complaint she answers that no equality of distribution is possible; the process is predicated upon a finite, inversely proportional allotment of "deserts". In this symbolic aspect of the wheel, the connotation of the "small red disc" might then give us the poem at the wheel, presented with cessation and loss

[17] See for instance, specifically in the case of the consolation of exile, Jo-Marie Claassen, *Displaced Persons: The Literature of Exile from Cicero to Boethius*, London: Duckworth, 1999).

[18] John Ferguson, *The Religions of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 86.

in the traffic of coin, and mindful of Fortune's terms. Ferguson continues his description of the typical symbols of Fortune's office:

> the cornucopiae indicating the prosperity she diffuses so unpredictably, the rudder symbolizing the direction of life […], and the globe, an ambiguous symbol, conveying the power of Fortune in the totality of the universe, the orb of authority, and at the same time lubricity and instability. Other typical emblems are the ship's prow, wings, the fruit-measure, the corn-ear and the libation bowl. (p. 86)

Many such depictions have come down to us through ancient Roman coinage, where Fortuna often appears on the reverse side of the coin.[19] John Melville Jones writes that while "Fortuna is rare on Republican coins […] it is during the early Empire that Fortuna is most common as a coin type."[20] The politics of this increased minting is provocative; the flood of acquired wealth from conquest and a concomitant increase in the geographic (and asymmetrical) possibilities of trade would occasion the wider dispersal and quantity of Roman currency, and that abundance in turn would require offerings for its continuance, making the Fortuna coin type a particularly abstract offertory token. According to Philip V. Hill even "the mint of Rome was under the patronage of Apollo Hercules, Fortune and Victory."[21] The predominant modern usage of *fortune* to denote material and especially monetary wealth, even as *misfortune* and *unfortunate* still signify bad luck, discloses an acute reversal which works in the background routine of the poem: fortune is (almost) emptied of divine oversight, and "taken up" (l. 11) with a notional index of positive monetary wealth, equally vacant in its material guise of modern currency. E. Victor Morgan confirms that "the essential feature of any medium in which payments are made is not intrinsic

[19] See for example an *aes* coin minted in 78 BCE during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian, reproduced in Anne S. Robertson, *Roman Imperial Coins in the Hunter Coin Cabinet*, 5 vols, (London; Glasgow; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962-1982) I. *Augustus to Nerva*, (1962), p. 200 and pl. 33.
[20] *A Dictionary of Ancient Roman Coins* (London: Seaby, 1990), p. 120.
[21] *The Monuments of Ancient Rome as Coin Types* (London: Seaby, 1989), p. 72.

value, but general acceptability," a feature which has come to govern "most modern monetary systems."[22]

For Boethius to be consoled, his philosophical outlook must include an utter indifference to both poverty *and* wealth, as it must to home *and* exile; yet fortune recast in the economic ethics of Prynne's poem attends to such indifference in the light of a social theory of economic history. Prynne gestures towards this in what he calls an "exilic (left-wing) history of substance" in "A Note on Metal" (1968).[23] In this sketch of metallurgic history Prynne considers the "politics of *wealth*" (p. 129) directly connected with the progressive stages of coinage and the abstraction of essential "quality" (p. 128) from substance (the emphases are his own). He continues:

> for a long time the magical implications of transfer in any shape must have given a muted and perhaps not initially debased sacrality to objects of currency-status, just as fish-hooks and bullets became strong magical objects in the societies formed around their use. But gradually the item-form becomes iconized, in transitions like that from *aes rude* (irregular bits of bronze), through *aes signatum* (cast ingots or bars) to *aes grave* (the circular stamped coin). The metonymic unit is established, and number replaces strength or power as the chief assertion of presence. (p. 129)

In light of these possible contexts, it is tempting to compare the curved conical shape of Fortune's cornucopiae, the horn of plenty, to the form suggested by the two ends of the "small red disc" and the "point" in l. 6-7. We see "our conscious needs" bending into its initial abundance (coin; corn-ears) that gradually diminishes to the emptied-out tip where "more cannot be found", except its obverse of lack, and implied physical entrapment ("where else could we go").

§ 5

11 if the two

[22] *A History of Money* (Middlesex; Baltimore; Victoria: Penguin, 1965), p. 23.
[23] 'A Note on Metal' [1968] in *Poems*, 127-132 (p. 130).

12 notes sounded together could possess themselves, be
13 ready in their own maximum:

Whether the "two | notes" should be considered as musical notes and so constitute a harmonic interval, is not certain. Nevertheless, the allusion to harmony and musical scale adds another texture to the poem's attention to standards of value (here in the sense of sound-values, or perhaps sound values). The projective aspiration for "notes" already "sounded" to reach their own level, to attain their own exclusive influence, is conditional upon the direct quotation given after the colon. Still, the "two |notes" indicate extremes of scale: the greatest height of "maximum" and the depth-measurement available in "sounded," eventuate another such collapse of scale as that found in the homophonic play of the "raised bank." It might be that the sound produced was the rustle of two promissory bank notes rubbed together, which could become "ready," that is, ready money or hard cash, if the "maximum," in the sense of highest value, could be wrested from the notes – generally used to represent the highest denominations – and transferred back into coinage, exchanged for small change. Paper money as a medium of exchange is first attested in tenth-century China however, according to Martin Monestier, "the first real bank notes destined for public circulation appear in Europe" and "it was the Bank of Stockholm that first issued them in 1656. The reason of this first issue of paper money was a very severe devaluation of copper coins."[24] The institution of representative or bank money in the process of monetary development was yet another displacement, another significant step in the abstraction of substance, and Prynne describes an earlier, theoretically related, development in the history of currency, that of metal alloy coins. He recounts how Croesus, "the first recorded millionaire," devised "bimetallic currency, where even the *theoretic* properties of metal are further displaced, into the stratified functionalism of a monetary system."[25] Whatever transformative power was formerly invested in materials like metal, especially those recognised as precious like gold or silver, has been thoroughly tokenized. An English banknote still invokes the Bank of England's promise to pay the bearer the sum of the note in

[24] See *The Art of Paper Currency* (London; Melbourne; New York: Quartet, 1983), pp. 18-19.
[25] "A Note on Metal," p. 130.

gold, yet such an exchange ultimately ceased to be possible – ceased to be a true promise – after the second world war, when the gold standard was finally done away with. Banknotes can only be exchanged for other banknotes to their face value. Even in this projected reversal of paper to readies, then, the routine outlined in § 4.2 still applies: one token, one abstraction, exchanged for another.

§ 6

13 […] "O how farre
14 art though gone from thy Country, not being
15 driven away, but wandring of thine owne accord."

This quotation is taken directly, with the interjection of two line-breaks, from Book I, Prose V of the *Consolation*. The Prose V is spoken by Philosophy in response to Boethius' lament in the preceding Verse, in which he "complaineth, that all things are governed by Gods providence, beside the actions and affayres of men" (fol. 16[r]). The verse's framing conceit is a complaint offered up to the sky, to a heavenly maker, and begins:

> Creator of the skie,
> Who sitst on thine æternall throne on hie,
> Who doest quicke motion cause,
> In all the heav'ns, and giv'st the starres their lawes.
> (fol. 16[r])

The verse continues with a brief account of the motions of the sun, moon, and the fixed stars, all of which confirm the stable and unchanging celestial order, after which Boethius takes up his grievance with conversely mutable and capricious fortune that (or who, as in § 4.3, above) presides over the "affayres of men."

Alongside Philosophy's vocative utterance in the 1609 *Consolation* is a prominent marginal note in which the allegorical character of Boethius' self-fashioned exile is emphasised. The textual note glosses the 'Country' out of which he has wandered: "Mans Country is wisedome" (n. 'a', fol. 17[r]). The gloss also proposes the source, Lucius Annaeus Seneca's *De Remediis Fortuitorum*, or Remedies against Fortune, a dialogue between *Feeling* and *Reason* (*Sensus* and *Ratio*), in which *Reason* counters *Feeling*'s threats of mortality, poverty and exile

with the fortitude and abnegation of Stoic doctrine. The note also includes a few lines in the Latin: "Si sapiens est non peregrinatur, si stultus est, exulat": that is, "if you are wise, do not wander, if you are foolish, be an exile." The Latin texts of two editions of the *De Remediis*, one from 1547 and another from 1902, do not quite give this sense. In both versions the injunction not to wander is not made, rather both translate as: "if you are wise, wander, if you are foolish, be exiled."[26] This is more accurate in the context of Seneca's Stoic indifference to place or country in the dialogue as a whole, as one of *Reason*'s other responses to *Feeling*'s threats of exile shows: "my countre is in every place where it is well, for that whiche is well, is in the man, nat in the place."[27]

This potential philological reach through Boethius to Seneca goes some way to help characterize the relation between l. 11-13 and 13-15 via the problematic indifference to the internal and external conditions of exile and wealth across the embedded textual sources. In *De Remediis*, *Reason* answers *Feeling*'s envy of the man who has "muche money": "Thou iuges the man riche, it is the coffer: who dothe enuy at that treasury?" (p. 49). Likewise, in the *Consolation*, Philosophy's reproof of covetousness for material wealth relies upon a rejection of externalized value attached to material or, "outward goods" (fol. 38^{v}) in favour of true goodness, and she asks Boethius: "have you no proper & inward good, that you seeke so much after those things which are outward and separated from you? Is the condition of things so changed, that man, who is deservedly accounted divine for the gift of reson, seemeth to have no other excellency than the possession of a litle houshold stuffe?" (fol. 39^{r}). Riches are bestowed and reclaimed by Fortune and her turning wheel, and are not one's own possessions. The renouncement of material goods in favour of "inward good" secures the attainment of

[26] See *Ad Gallioneni de Remedis Fortuitorum. The Remedyes Agaynst All Casuall Chaunces. A Bialogue Between Sensualyte and Reason*, trans. by Robert Whyttynton (London: Wyllyam Myddylton, 1547) reprinted in *Seneca's De Remediis Fortuitorum and the Elizabethans*, Ralph Graham Palmer (Chicago: Institute of Elizabethan Studies, 1953), p. 44, and *Ad Gallionem De Remediis Fortuitorum Liber*, in *L. Annaei Senecae Opera Quae Supersunt Supplementum*, ed. by Fr. Haase (Lipsae: Tuebingen, 1902), p. 48.

[27] *Ad Gallioneni de Remediis Fortuitorum*, trans. by Whyttnton, p. 45.

virtue, as it does the triumph of reason over feeling, and so provides a remedy against Fortune.

§ 6.1

The poem's divisive opening imperative to leave the city with or without the "slender distraction" is then a question not just of spatial or geographical allegiances but of the ethics of our material condition, a question that the primacy of inwardness encountered in Boethius and Seneca, mitigating against the vicissitudes of outward existence, does not accommodate. The word "distraction" is then an overloaded term to begin with, since it must function within the demands of a figurative use of spatial vocabulary for inner feeling or condition (recalling as it does such phrases as *going out of one's mind*, or the inverse of this, *her mind wandered*). In this way the emptying-out and taking-up of the "distraction" in l. 10-11 recalibrates the poem's inward and/or outward allusive procedures, re-focussing on the dialectics of motion and settlement, need and fulfilment, passion and reason, in the remaining lines.

§ 7

16 On the bank an increase of sounds, and walk through
17 the sky the grass, that any motion is the first
18 settlement. We plant and put down cryptic slopes
19 to the damp grass, this passion fading off to the
20 intensely beaten path:

§ 7.1 "On the bank an increase of sounds"

While the 'two | notes' in l. 11-12 were soundings conditionally constrained, these "sounds" are present, their sources already given in the poem. The "bank" as a site of both vegetative and monetary accumulation would produce the noisy inrush of mounting grain, the jingle of coinage and the rustle of bank notes. (Here is a sound-economy, though not, we might judge, an unassailable or perfectly sound economy.) If this is the sound-trace of the historical development of modern western economies, its stages of abstraction from grain to coin to paper notes is under-heard; its mechanism of reinvestment toward even greater "increase" – the necessity of profit

– is also suggested in the feedback of the corn-crop which provides its own figurative listeners in its ears, and of the coins and bank notes, with the ears on the heads minted and printed on them.

§ 7.1 "walk through | the sky the grass"

Although there might finally be motion, the form of this phrase feels like another imperative and not an action directly occurring. It may be that this walk is imaginatively projected into the current scene represented, in which the self is viewed at the most distant visible point on the horizon, where the sky meets the grass (that visual bond conveyed in the conspicuous lack of grammatical conjunction between the two noun phrases). Just like the motions of the "fervent companion" and "our conscious needs" this is motion by proxy that indirectly interrogates the idea of *proper motion*. If this is a mental image of movement, projected (outward) and hoped for, is it a comfort or a disappointment that "any motion is the first | settlement," that the point of origin can never be left behind, and each digression is really an excursion? The act of putting down "cryptic slopes" is an attempt to hide traces of movement, to remove the paths back to the "settlement" that this motion left. In the "cryptic slopes" lie a potential for nomadic wandering, with no visible way of return. Again this is colour-coded entropy, and the reversal it shows pivots on the meaning of Prynne's "green": the "slopes" are gradients which fall to green ("the damp grass") in hope of dispersal; but instead their overriding "passion" fades, and on the "slopes" arises a well-travelled and trammelled path, the way outward and homeward. The central quotation from Boethius is forced through this closing phase of the poem's procedure. Wandering without recourse to home is indexed to "passion" in opposition to the reason of settlement; but any attempt at the former, however oblique, results in the latter.

Settlement on the earth is all too close to a final rest in it: the sepulchral residue of the 'crypt' in "cryptic slopes" suggests some potential for a loss of human and vegetative life in staying put; yet properly read in its chthonic aspect it signifies not death and dissolution so much as dormancy, the path untaken. The "slopes" are planted and hidden underground in dissemination: do we only plant what we expect will grow? Again, Prynne's disconsolation is rooted in that of Boethius. The physical act of planting is an allegorized process in the *Consolation* in which a cultivated mind, Philosophy says,

produces a "fruitful crop of reason" (fol. 3[r]): Prynne's 'burned' crop gives no such certain hopes.

§ 8

20 that it should be possessed
21 of need & desire coiled into the sky, and then dis-
22 membered into the prairie twitching with herbs,
23 pale, that it is the city run out and retained
24 for the thousands of miles allowed, claimed to be so.

§ 8.1 "need & desire"

The etymology of the word desire, to long for or feel the lack of something, is the Latin *desidere*, morphologically 'de + sidera', literally 'from the stars'. Stellar influence then subtends these lines: need and desire might be satisfied by reaching into the sky to receive what the stars provide. Boethius' Philosophy declares that:

> When hoat [sic] with Phœbus beams,
> The Crab casts fiery gleames,
> He, that doth then with seede,
> The fruitlesse furrowes feede,
> Deceived of his bread,
> Must be with akornes fed. (fol. 19[v])

The stars are more than seasonal markers: they do not merely indicate when to sow and harvest. They are, according to Creech's Manilius, "*conscious* of our Fates and Arts *Divine*, | The wondrous work of *Heaven's* first wise design" (I. p. 2). This is a heavenly design, transplanted to earth, where the telluric is invested with the beatific. Not to sow crops at the right time of year was not only (or perhaps not even) an objective failure of husbandry; it was a failure to observe and respect the divine order. To forsake the heavenly-bestowed gift of the art of agriculture incurred the punishment of a failed crop, the effective withdrawal of the presiding star's or divinity's favour. A farmer, says Philosophy, who sows out of season disregarding the stellar signs does so in error: "he, that with headlong path | This certaine order leaves | An hapless end receaves" (I.V. Fol. 19[r]). This is to go off the "beaten path" (l. 20). He is 'deceived' or has cheated

himself out of his life-sustaining bread, the satiety of his most pressing need, his bodily nourishment. The Latin translated here as 'bread' is 'Cereris', the genitive form of the name *Ceres*, the Roman Goddess of agriculture. Barbette Stanley Spaeth notes that "the metonymic use of Ceres' name to mean 'grain' or 'bread' is common" in Roman literature of the Augustan period, especially in Ovid's *Fasti*, Vergil's *Georgics* and Manilius' *Astronomica*.[28] Cicero in his *Verrine Orations* describes the beneficence of the Goddess Ceres: "ye by whom food and nourishment, virtue and law, gentleness and culture, were first given us, they say, and spread abroad among men and nations."[29] Spaeth expansively glosses the paean:

> Ceres is a goddess of beginnings, for it is she who provided the laws that enable humankind to establish civilization, especially the law that provided for the division of the fields and led to the adoption of agriculture and hence civilized life. The goddess is connected with the transition from a lawless state to an ordered one, from a society based on hunting and gathering to one based on agriculture, from barbarism to civilization. (p. 17)

In "A Note on Metal" Prynne briefly extends his historical reading of the extraction of essence from stone and metal to living crops and describes the:

> rapid advance of metallurgy, shifting from the transfer of life as power (hunting) into the more settled expectation of reaping what you have already sown; this itself produces the idea of *place* as the chief local fact, which makes mining and the whole extractive industry possible from them on. The threshing of millet or barley must bring a 'purer' and more abstract theory of value; the mixed relativism of substance leads, by varied but in outline predictable stages,

[28] *The Roman Goddess Ceres* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), pp. 20-21.

[29] *The Verrine Orations*, 2 vols, trans. by L. H. G. Greenwood (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), I: *Against Verres* (II.V. 187-193).

> to value as a specialized function and hence as dependent on rate of exchange. (p. 129)

The Latin etymology of "companion" is 'with bread' or figuratively, 'breadfellow'; the corn ground and baked to make bread might be another attitude in which we can read the "fervent companion" of l. 5 (see § 2.3, above). The need, then, of "curving round to home" for the sake of the "fervent companion", is the necessity of returning to reap what you have sown, exactly *where* you have sown it. The imperative to move and the need to remain settled implied in the keen, unshakable "companion" is the hunger for daily bread.

Considering the colloquial idiomatic use of 'bread' for money, abstraction and transmutation are again lexically attested: extracted 'profit' from the corn draws outwards this sense of value to an economy begun on the agrarian basis of surplus wealth *in potentia* in surplus grain. The "idea of *place*" established the possibility of a fixed locale as 'home', hence a culturally saturated idea of the foreign, and foreign 'trade', of transportable stores of value, ripe for exchange. In Book II of the *Consolation* is Philosophy's panegyric to the golden age of agriculture that nonetheless describes the same interrelated development with a striking note of lament:

> Too much the former age was blest,
> When fields their pleased owners failed not,
> Who with no slouthfull lust opprest,
> Broke their long fasts with akornes eas'ly got.
> No wine with honie mixed was,
> Nor did they silke in purple colours steepe,
> They slept upon the wholesome grasse,
> And their coole drink did fetch from rivers deepe.
> The Pines did hide them with their shade,
> No Merchants through the dang'rous billowes went,
> Nor with desire of gainfull trade
> Their trafficke into forraine Countreyes sent.
> Then no shrill Trumpets did amate
> The minds of Soldiers with their daunting sounds,
> Nor weapons were with through deadly hate
> Dy'd with the dreadful bloud of gaping wounds.
> For how could any furie draw
> The mind of man to stirre up warres in vaine,
> When nothing, but fierce wounds he saw,

And for his blood no recompence should gaine?
O that the ancient maners would
In these, our latter hapless times return.
Now the desire of having gold
Doth like the flaming fires of *Ætna* burne.
Ah who was he, that first did show
The heapes of treasure, which the earth did hide,
And jewels which lay close below,
By which he costly dangers did provide?

(fol. 41^{v}- 41^{r})

Two passages are of especial note in the *Astronomica*, for they both work within this sequence, which beginning with corn, entails settlement, agriculture, bread, foreign trade, and wealth via excess; with virtue, or the common good, and vice, or private evil, the two extremes indexed to the conditions of sufficiency and surplus. Manilius prophecies that those born under the star-sign of Capricorn will have a thirst for metallurgy; the furnace for smelting metals is, pertinently, equated to an oven in which bread is baked. Moreover, therein Corn ('Cererem') is given a new form and so a radically different value (IV. 234-255).

The similarly prophetic aspect of the final book of the *Astronomica* evinces the fate of those born under the star of Spica or the 'Corn-Ear' as more fortunate. Creech renders lines 270-292 so:

When in her Tenth Degree, the *Sheaf* appears,
Shews her dull Corn, and shakes her loaden Ears:
The Fields may fear, for those that shall be born
Shall Plough the Ground, and be intent on Corn:
They'll trust their Seed to Clods, whose large produce
Shall yield the *Sum*, and give increase by *Use*.
Build Barns for Grain, for Nature those contrives,
And in the *Ear* it self a pattern gives;
In that the Corn lies safe, her Laws ordain
A proper different Cell for every Grain:
How blest the World, had this been only known,
Had *Gold* lain hid, and *Corn* been born alone!
The Men were rich, when they could Want suffice,
And knew no Baits for Lust, and Avarice.
Yet had they still employ'd their Cares on Corn
Alone, those Arts would have been slowly born,

> Which make Grain useful, and for Common good,
> Grind, Mould, and Bake, and work it up to Food.[30]

The cultivation of corn was divinely given to suffice need and want, but not more. Delving beneath the earth to find hidden precious metals services greed for surplus, for profit, for external goods: it is the first move towards the abstractive process of coinage and the inimical value system of money. The double severance of "need & desire" and their link to the sky, is the severance of material need to be satisfied by divine providence.

§ 8.1 "then dis- | membered into the prairie, twitching with herbs"

The peculiar bodily connotations of the "dis- | membered," and the phonic similarity between *urbs* and "herbs" (Latin = *herba*, grass or green plants) bring us back to the conditions of the city. But this relation is systematically predicated upon a colour-coded entropy focused on that very same "washed-out | green," since even the herbs are "pale." The violence of the (chronic) downfall of the city is the first term of the routine of this entropic dissolution. The "twitching of herbs" in the "prairie" signals the drawing-out of focus to a larger scene, initiated by the projective walk in l. 16: the twitches are due to the diminishing scale of the poem's scene, and the continued energy-loss of the city seen from a distance -- already but not entirely "shaken down." There is a chromatic sense of growth but not really of ripening; there is spectral access to green (unripeness), a vital colour sign that is fading, and to red, which implies burning (corn), and smelting (coin), the physical processes of reduction, of abstraction and material dissolution. The poem's initialising divisive imperative begins a routine completed in l. 23; the city is here both left and kept, held in place and in possession. Exilic wandering-out and homeward movement, without the city's collapse, are granted, but still under the duress of "veritas," under the signs of the actual versus the real. A distance from which the delicate balance of home and exile can be maintained is offered, yet it is done so without consoled knowledge of the answer to the question of the city: the question of whether it can supply the highest condition or the "maximum veritas" of anyone's inner or outer existence.

[30] *The Five Books of M. Manilius*, pp. 64-65.