HILARIOUS ABSOLUTE DAYBREAK

Keston Sutherland

1. *Introduction*

Prynne's poetry of the 1960s is as intellectually ambitious as Milton's of the 1660s. In revolt against "the deliberately small aims and over-developed musculature of most English writers of verse, sheltering with provincial timidity behind the irony inherited from Eliot",[1] Prynne set out in *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* a prospectus for philosophic song so astronomically demanding that Manilius might have shrunk from it in trepidation. A new figure for human existence at the far extreme of its mortal potential must be found in lyric, a figure that could speak our claim to the city of love loud and clear over the racket ensemble in the modern market: "the figure, gleaming on the path, / the person who shines…", *who we are*.[2] Every resource would be stretched to that infinite end. Phenomenology from its beginnings in Ockham and the Scholastics to the present day would be reinterpreted as the *moralism* of immediate knowledge, under the modern impulses of Nicolai Hartmann and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; materialism would be radicalised to include among its objects of speculative dialectical analysis the relations of *natural* production, from deglaciation to the North Atlantic turbine; morphology, lexicology and etymology would become component parts of the technique of a lyric poetry that learned from and outstripped Heidegger's restitution to philosophy of the archaic meanings of basic concepts; modern science would be studied and learned in detail, Pound's comments on "modern physics" exposed for ranting dalliances, and all data, no matter how vanishingly hypermodern, hypothetical or arcane, brought under the central command of a

[1] Prynne, "from a letter" *Mica* 5 (1962): 3.
[2] Prynne, 'East-South-East'. *Poems*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre, and Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2005: 137.

hermeneutics of our latent existential possibility; Wordsworth's brotherhood of all the human race would be reasserted against the defamiliarizations of post-romantic real life and its laid back ironies and complacent dismemberments. A poet would make "song" once again into "the proper guise" of "the whole order" of reality.[3]

"The end of the 60s", Fredric Jameson once wrote, should be fixed at "around 1972-74."[4] *La vie quotidienne* took a few years to recuperate after its traumatic bid for freedom in 1968; the 1973 OAPEC oil embargo is, for the periodizing historian of the vicissitudes of intellectual universalism, a good peg on which to hang the narrative of our return to working order. If Jameson's numbers are acceptable, then *Brass* is a prophecy at the threshold, a genuine "anticipatory movement in the superstructure" if ever there was one in British poetry since the elongated death of John Keats.[5] In the forty years since its publication, no poetry in English has managed to fully assimilate *Brass* or altogether get over it, no criticism has taken its measure, and no step change in the theatre of literary theoretical operations has come near to neutralising its insurgent "lacerating whimsicalities".[6] How did this book happen? How can we read it now? What is it? To start we need to rewind.

The turn from the universal brotherhood of *The White Stones* to the "Hyper-bonding of the insect" of *Brass* was not sudden or abrupt.[7]

[3] "the whole order set in this, the / proper guise, of a song." Prynne, *Poems*. 64. For a compressed account of this project to restore lyric to power, see Keston Sutherland, "XL Prynne" in *A Manner of Utterance: The Poetry of J.H. Prynne*, ed. Ian Brinton (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009), 104-132 [first published in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, eds. Sam Ladkin and Robin Purves (Prague: Literaria Pragensia, 2007), 43-73]; for an extensive account, see Keston Sutherland, "J.H. Prynne and Philology" (PhD diss, University of Cambridge, 2004).

[4] Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory. Essays 1971-1986 Vol.2: The Syntax of History* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), 184.

[5] I borrow the phrase "anticipatory movement in the superstructure" from Ernst Bloch's criticism of Lukács. Ernst Bloch et. al., *Aesthetics and Politics*. (London: Verso, 1994), 20.

[6] "[I]n *Brass* all thought of Providence is guarded and largely held away, or hemmed in by lacerating whimsicalities which are the encamped substitutes for 'wit' in the no man's land of the modern avant garde." Kevin Nolan, 'Capital Calves: Undertaking an Overview,' *Jacket* 24 (November 2003) http://jacketmagazine.com/24/nolan.html

[7] 'L'Extase de M. Poher' *Poems*, 162.

It was anticipated in the later poems of *The White Stones* itself, particularly in those written after Prynne had lost personal contact with Charles Olson. Already in 'A Stone Called Nothing,' first published, fittingly, in the final issue of *The English Intelligencer* in April 1968, Prynne seems about ready to throw out the account of modern alienation that runs through *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*, but which is given most clearly in a short prose text called 'About Warning an Invited Audience,' published in *The English Intelligencer* late in 1967. According to that account, modern alienation is a trick. We decide that history is irreversible disenchantment, and then witlessly set about extrapolating a figure for our own life from the outline of that conceit, a person whose ecstasies can be nothing but the private shimmer of adrenaline against a spiritless background of forward thinking and existential cutbacks. As Prynne puts it in 'Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform', "we make / sacred what we cannot see without coming / back to where we were."[8] Whatever we can't get, we name "sacred". Lacan is a con, Lukács of *Die Theorie des Romans* is already the confabulist of the party line: the world they stare at is the "mirror of a would-be alien who won't see how / much he is at home."[9] Lyric will make him see how much he is.

In 1966 Prynne wrote poems that issued direct appeals to the reader, poems full of austere exhortation and moral despair that often read like sermons. His poetry emphatically reclaimed the *power* of knowledge, not for the clerk, *vates* or adept but for each and any of us in our common answerability as the creatures of language. This was to be "the back mutation" that would arrest "the same vicious grid of expanding [capitalist] prospects" by contradicting it, restoring us to "the richest tradition / of the trust it is possible to have."[10] If we try to read *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* as a coherent whole, a cycle in which contradictions between individual poems are a *story* anticipated in all of them, not as the erratic development of thinking over whose course earlier poems are tested, refracted, stretched and sometimes negated by later ones, then it may seem, after those lines from 'Die A Millionaire', that these two excerpts from 'A Stone Called Nothing' are the end of the story:

[8] *Poems*, 99.
[9] 'Questions for the Time Being' *Poems*, 112.
[10] 'Die A Millionaire' *Poems*. 16. First published in *The English Intelligencer*, April 1966, p. 73.

> The devastation is aimless; folded with-
> out recompense, change down to third do any
> scandalous thing, the gutters run with milk.
> [...]
> Failure
> without falling, the air is a frozen passage,
> the way bleached out, we are silent now. The
> child is the merest bent stick; I cannot move.
> There should be tongues of fire & yet now
> the wipers are going, at once a thin rain is
> sucked into the glass, oh I'll trust anything.[11]

The richest tradition of the trust it is possible to have here gives way to the trust it is possible to have. When does it? On a bus-ride into "the moonstruck fields of the lower paid" whose lift-off was announced way back in the exordium at lines 4-6. The poet, taken for a ride, gets drizzle instead of the Pentecost. The thin rain appears to be "sucked into the glass" because the windscreen of the bus speeds into it as it falls; and so it really "is" sucked into it, if, in "the richest tradition / of the trust it is possible to have", we make perception into a power of ownership of reality. The poem tries to do it, right now, as the bus creeps through the suburbs, and fails, guttering into throwaway internal monologue. The air is impassable, destiny blanked, catastrophe without cadence. But 'A Stone Called Nothing' is not the end of the story. It is not yet Prynne's decisive abandonment of "trust" in phenomenology as a "*beginning* on power";[12] but lyric as public transport is the aimless *Wanderlied* struggling to fend off what it uncertainly thinks is the nigh end of whatever *beginning* is left to it. Fellow travellers do not get "the / flight back / to where / we are" which is the name for "love" in 'Airport Poem', the first poem in *The White Stones*. Instead we ask "where are we now", gazing inattentively out of the window into the blurry English darkness. One thing that distinguishes *Brass* from the later poems of *The White Stones* is that the "aimless devastation" in *The White Stones* is entirely our fault. The "figure" of our "complete / fortune" is ready and waiting for us, but we ignore and refuse it (the

[11] *Poems*, 120-121.
[12] 'The Numbers', *Poems*, 11.

charge against us is redacted into Idiot's Guide monoglotese in the 1979 book *Down where changed*, where we "fail the test, and miss our doom.")[13] Theodicy is unnecessary, or, worse, is already part of the alienation trick: this *is* our universe, the stars shine in love *right now*, we need only discover our "agency / of surrender" to them.[14] Our failure in *The White Stones* is sung in lamentation, confessed in melancholy outcries, iterated in vignettes shaped to a private life that are compulsorily iconic of universal abandonment. What happens throughout *Brass*, but is only hinted at toward the end of *The White Stones*, is *satire* against that lamentation and savage mockery of the idea of a cosmogenic agency of surrender. Ignoring and looking away in this *ouvrage bien moral* no longer devastate fortune, but comprise it.[15] Our trust in the possibility that love is the shape of our compulsion may suddenly fail on a bus-ride through the rough end of town, but this strictly occasional failure is, in *The White Stones*, a treason against being ("we are easily disloyal", Prynne laments in 'Love in the Air'),[16] and lyric remains what it must be, in spite of us: the protest of passion and fortune against "the temporary nothing" in which life slides on in shrunken self-acceptance. Wrong life cannot be lived rightly, in *The White Stones*, but only if we are too lazy to figure out what to call it. We may "trust anything" when stuck in traffic crawling through "the seedy broken outskirts of the town" which "so easily…fits to / the stride" as well as to the progress of the bus;[17] but in 1968, we are not yet condemned to this town, and its magistrates certainly have nothing to do with our real freedom. We know where its horizon is: we can see "the few / outer lights of the city." We are not condemned to it, so we needn't be much interested in it, either: actually to describe the experience of public life in other than iconographic detail would be to elbow lyric into remission ('One Way At Any Time', whose title is two English road signs jammed together, is a parody of that elbow room).[18]

[13] 'In Cimmerian Darkness', *Poems* 74; 'Is that quite all…', *Poems* 305.
[14] 'In Cimmerian Darkness', Poems 74.
[15] The phrase "ouvrage bien moral" is from the epigraph to *Brass*, which is from Beaumarchais's *Le Mariage de Figaro*. For some useful commentary on the significance of that choice, see Nolan, 'Capital Calves'.
[16] *Poems* 55.
[17] 'Love in the Air' *Poems* 56; 'Since otherwise…', *Poems* 27.
[18] *Poems* 110. The road sign that reads "One Way" identifies a one way street; "At Any Time" means "no stopping at any time". The poem runs out as if in

Brass is the book in which direct proposals for getting into "the city" of love are noisily muted. Lamentation gives way to satire, the outer lights of the city are folded back into the power grid. It is not easy to see. *Brass* is a difficult book, in a way that even the most pressingly recondite poems of *The White Stones* are not difficult. The earlier poems are for the most part both rhetorically and propositionally coherent. Their prosody is sustained across specimen and trial disruptions by an emphatic confidence in the power of lyric to assert fluency. The poems of *Brass* satirise that confidence. Their disruptions are not propaedeutics to fluency. Deglaciation in 1971 is not the augury of self-transcendence but the far end of the seesaw: "frost and reason, reason and frost, / the same stormy inconsequence."[19] I've suggested elsewhere that Prynne's loss of contact with Charles Olson and the abandonment of what Prynne believed was their shared project was one reason for this change.[20] This helps us to understand the agitated contrariness of *Brass*. But the later book is different not only because it amortises the most iconic ideas in *The White Stones*. *Brass* does what *The White Stones*, Olson and Heidegger programmed themselves not to do: it recasts the *Heimkehr* of fortune as the paralytic transit from destiny to modern politics, and it does that by *evacuating* lamentation rather than by universalising it. *Brass* is the reversal of a reversal, "the question / returned upon itself".[21] My commentary on a single poem in *Brass* begins here, with "the soul's discursive fire" infolded like a hairdryer under the eyelid of satire, in the grip of election fever.[22]

2. *Culture in "this" sense*

Reeve and Kerridge give in their study of Prynne an extended reading of the poem 'L'Extase de M. Poher'.[23] In common with every

nattering accidental mimicry of a credulous reader of *Die Theorie des Romans* or Schiller on the naïve and the sentimental: "it is Bristol it / is raining I wish I were Greek and could / trust all I hear…" etc.

[19] 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder'. *Poems*. 151. Cf. 'White & Smart'. *Poems*. 185: "go to / the mirror boy and see the frost there".

[20] Keston Sutherland, 'XL Prynne'.

[21] 'Crown', *Poems* 117. Cf. Kevin Nolan, 'Revision Questions on Staircraft', *Loving Little Orlick*. London: Barque, 2006: 61. "here our colleague tries to recontextualise Providence as kenotic social policy."

[22] 'Crown', *Poems* 117.

[23] *Nearly Too Much*. 8.

other published reading of 'L'Extase de M. Poher', Reeve and Kerridge's reading makes no attempt either to specify in detail the particular historical context of the poem, or to examine its lexicon in order to explain the appearance of words whose complex meaning is in part owed to their earlier appearances in other poems by Prynne.[24] In the case of 'L'Extase de M. Poher' this might seem specially surprising, since the connections between its lexicon and the lexicon of *The White Stones* are very prominent, and furthermore those connections are crucial to the argument in the poem which Reeve and Kerridge are trying to summarise. It is surprising too because the poem's title directly names the historical moment in which it was written. Here is the poem in full:

L'Extase de M. Poher

Why do we ask that, as if wind in the
telegraph wires were nailed up in some
kind of answer, formal derangement of
the species. Days and weeks spin by in
theatres, gardens laid out in rubbish, this
is the free hand to refuse everything.
No
question provokes the alpha rhythm by
the tree in our sky turned over; certain
things follow:
who is the occasion
now what
is the question in

[24] Kevin Nolan gives the following hasty sketch in 'Capital Calves': "What now remains, in the local perspective overshadowing enlightenment, is the collapse of the radical zeal of the 1960s, the failures of Spring in Paris, in Prague, in Ohio. Those false dawns are observed directly in *L'Extase de M. Poher*, where the Luxembourg gardens and the consternation of Alain Poher (Charles de Gaulle's Interior Minister) as [*sic*: at?] the youthful *putschistes en herbe* is literally depicted, displacing the parodic neo-Davidian image of revolution in John Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath* (1962), where 'Europe' is a post Eliotic theatre of operations upon a cultural lexis that can bear no more than ironic scrutiny." Nolan has got the right Poher, but the wrong context. Prynne's poem is about Poher the opponent of de Gaulle in 1969, not Poher the minister under de Gaulle in 1968. His comment on Ashbery is typically excellent.

which she
what for is a version
of when, i.e.
some payment about time again and how
"can sequence conduce" to order as more
than the question: more gardens: list
the plants as distinct
from lateral
front to back or not
grass "the most
successful plant on our
heart-lung by-
pass and into passion sliced into bright
slivers, the yellow wrapping of what we do.
Who is it: what person could be generalised
on a basis of "specifically" sexual damage,
the townscape of that question.
Weather
of the wanton elegy, take a chip out of
your right thumb. Freudian history again makes
the thermal bank: here
credit 92°[25]
a/c payee only, reduce to
now what
laid out in the body
sub-normal
or grass etc, hay as a touch of the
social self put on a traffic island. Tie
that up, over for next time, otherwise there
is a kind of visual concurrence;
yet
the immediate body of wealth is not
history, body fluid not dynastic. No
poetic gabble will survive which fails
to collide head-on with the unwitty circus:
no history running

[25] In the French translation of *Brass* by Prynne and Bernard Dubourg, "92°" has become "34°." The figure is therefore a measurement of temperature and not an angle in geometry. *Oripeau Clinquaille* in *PO&SIE* 3 (1977): 18.

with the french horn into
the alley-way, no
manifest emergence
of valued instinct, no growth
of meaning & stated order:
we are too kissed & fondled,
no longer instrumental
to culture in "this" sense or
any free-range system of time:
1. Steroid metaphrast
2. Hyper-bonding of the insect
3. 6% memory, etc
any other rubbish is mere political rhapsody, the
gallant lyricism of the select, breasts & elbows,
what
else is allowed by the verbal smash-up piled
under foot. Crush tread trample distinguish
put your choice in the hands of the town
clerk, the army stuffing its drum. 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.[26]

"M. Poher" is Alain Poher, president of the French senate and, following the resignation of Charles de Gaulle on April 27th 1969, president of France during the brief interim period pending new presidential elections. De Gaulle had ostensibly resigned in reaction to losing a referendum on senate and regional government reform, through which he had hoped to diffuse political opposition to his government following the revolutionary riots of May 1968 by creating new regional administrations outside of Paris. Poher rose to brief fame through his vocal opposition to the referendum, which he denounced on the 2nd April 1969 as one that effectively proposed "the end of the legislative Senate and a tacit entry into a single chamber regime."[27] Shortly before de Gaulle's resignation, *L'Express* reported

[26] *Poems* 161-2.
[27] *The Times* 3rd April 1969, 8c.

that "the referendum is perhaps in the process of forging a new 'national destiny'", and went on, "when Alain Poher (the president of the Senate) appeared last Thursday on television, the average Frenchman discovered a politician after his own image."[28] Poher himself, according to the journalist for *The Times*,

> constitutes a kind of political common denom-inator of all the disparate forces on the frontiers of Gaullism, from the extreme right to part of the non-communist left.[29]

Poher's common denominating won him the appellation "M. Tout-le-Monde" from the French media.[30] His opposition to de Gaulle's referendum was mounted in the figure of "the leading orchestrator of the "*non*" vote";[31] his supporters were called "the "Noes"" by the British press.[32]

Up to this moment, Poher was distinguished by his principled opposition to a bad referendum, together with his often repeated insistence that he would not himself stand as a candidate in the elections following a referendum defeat:[33] a kind of high political *refus*, emblemised in Prynne's poem by the word "No" standing in portentous isolation at line 7. The key theme of Poher's first television address following his temporary assumption of the national presidency on 28th April 1969 was reported by *The Times* of the following day on its front page:

> Beyond the differences brought out by the consultation of yesterday, you feel as deeply as I do, I am sure, that we must first, and all together, preserve the unity of the nation.

[28] *The Times* 25th April 1969, 10a.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *The Times* 6th May 1969, 10.
[31] McMillan, James. F., *Twentieth-Century France. Politics and Society 1898-1991.* London: Edward Arnold, 1992. 185.
[32] *The Times* 29th April 1969, 1: "M. Poher's quiet dignity and reserve since the victory of the "Noes" in the referendum became a certainty has already earned him the approval of the press and the public."
[33] "M. Poher told a press conference this evening that there was no question for the present of his expressing any intention of becoming a candidate in the coming presidential election." *Ibid.*

M. Tout-le-Monde swiftly came around to the view that the way to preserve the unity of the nation was in fact to stand for the presidency after all. On the 8th May he is reported as saying "I may be compelled to put my name forward"; on the 12th May he announced his candidacy.[34] *The Times* reported on the following day, again on its front page:

> If M. Alain Poher is elected President of the French Republic on June 15th it will be a triumph of the opinion polls over the considered wisdom of almost all the politicians and pundits in the business…[Poher] incarnates all the bourgeois virtues and has none of the Gaullist vices.[35]

On 18th May Poher again addressed the French voters on television. His "performance," said *The Times* of the 19th,

> was punctuated by such phrases as "there is good and bad in everything," "I am opposed to dissolution," "there is no need for a majority, but only for an absence of opposition," "there will be possibilities of agreement," and "one must create the Europe of possibilities."[36]

We know that Prynne read *The Times* throughout this period, because the majority of newspaper clippings tucked into the letters from Prynne to Ed Dorn, including an obituary for Paul Celan on May 23rd 1970, are from that newspaper.

Prynne wrote to Dorn on 31st May 1969, before the June presidential ballot and while it was still being reported likely that Poher would win the election:

> Poher is the manifest destiny of France, or of spaceship earth for that matter: "there is good and bad in everything"

[34] *The Times* 8th May 1969, 4; 13th May 1969, 1. For a short account of how Poher was persuaded to stand, see Serge Berstein and Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Cambridge History of Modern France: The Pompidou Years, 1969-1974* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 9*ff.*

[35] *The Times* 13th May 1969, 1.

[36] *The Times* 19th May 1969, 4.

> he says, which even for a provincial shopkeeper is pretty obviously untrue.

Earth as the ideal star-fighter finds its "manifest destiny" in the televisation of this corny bit of ersatz dialectics. But being "obviously untrue" is no longer the sabotage and melancholy it was in *The White Stones*. When it is "imitated by / lazy charade", the truth becomes "optional", says 'A New Tax on the Counter-Earth' in *Brass*, its eye on the moral revenue stream from counterfactuals; and when on earth is the truth *not* imitated by lazy charade?[37] In 'A Stone Called Nothing', the charade is the windscreen on which fiery perception *inside* the bus meets the drizzle *outside*; but still, when we get where we're going, we can get out. It is not our windscreen. In *Brass* the charade is on screen whether we switch it on or not, whether it's our screen or anyone else's, whatever our perception is doing, come rain or shine. Television is mentioned for the fourth and fifth times in Prynne's work in 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder,' the opening poem of *Brass*, in which also "[t]he head film matches the conduit / with banal migraine."[38] "Conduit" is a pompous synonym for "tube", the English slang name for television. The distorted echo here is of the earlier poem 'Against Hurt' in *The White Stones*, where "the pain in the head / which applies to me" is the deliberately stilted expression suggestive of the real difficulty of acknowledging our solidarity with the suffering of others: "pain, the hurt to these who are all / companions" whose "slender means" of survival is "[s]erenity."[39] In 'Against Hurt', pain applies to the head of the poet in solitary reflection, almost as a special feature of that solitude (a "perk", *Down where changed* calls it).[40] Listening in his silence, the poet "can hear / every smallest growth" of the trees and, by the "costly" direction of interior rhyme, the "growth" and passing of "the relative ease" of night, too. Silence at night allows the application of others to the

[37] *Poems* 173.
[38] *Poems* 151. One of the previous references is in 'Die A Millionaire' and two are in 'A Dream of Retained Colour'. "…our shoulders / are denied by the nuptial joys of television"; "TV beams romantically into / the biosphere…Lucifer, with- / out any street lamps or TV." *Poems.* 16, 103. TV and marriage, TV and romance, TV and Lucifer: in *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones* banality still means a clash a of registers.
[39] *Poems*, 52.
[40] 'A limit spark under water.' *Poems* 303.

imagination, so that despite their literal remoteness they can be admitted to communion with the "love" of the poet. Solidarity with "companions" is thus imaginative and is the triumph of quiescence. This is a very special night, enhanced by the imagination into a tribute to the imagination. It is an instance of what Prynne called in 'About Warning an Invited Audience' "the most radical image of calm which is to be found."[41] The poem immediately following 'Against Hurt' in *The White Stones* attempts to develop further the same context for solitary imaginative communion:

> The night is already quiet and I am
> bound in the rise and fall: learning
> to wish always for more. This is the
> means, the extension to keep very steady
> so that the culmination
> will be silent too and flow
> with no trace of devoutness.
> […]
> The challenge is
> not a moral excitement, but the expanse,
> the continuing patience
> […]
> we are more pliant than the mercantile notion
> of choice will determine–we go in this way
> on and on and the unceasing image of hope
> is our place in the world. We live there and now
> at night I recognise the signs
> of this, the calm is a
> modesty about conduct in
> the most ethical sense.
> ('Moon Poem' *Poems* 53)

Steadiness and patience are the "means" to protect silence and to proliferate it; "moral excitement" is its undoing. The "expanse," which in 'Against Hurt' is "grinding" with small growths and their metaphysical passage, might become our own "extent," which is "the extent / of all the wishes that are now too far beyond / us" *within*

[41] *The English Intelligencer*, 1st series, 1966, p. 8.

which we can "love them all," "these who are all / companions." We do this at night, when it is "already quiet."

A different "night" struts its cameo through *Brass*. First in 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder': "Love him, in *le silence des nuits, l'horreur des cimetieres*". That is, love him in the practised, actorly recitation of an unidentified line from Malherbe's 'Stances. Aux Ombres de Damon', a line that Prynne has deracinated from its context of mockery:

> Le silence des nuits, l'horreur des cimetières
> De son contentement sont les seules matières[42]

The now gothic night is the only material comfort that will do, its *silence* matched in 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder' to "TV with / the sound off." In 'The Five Hindrances' we are asked: "What is / this high street at night, in every direction the / same as itself?" Again the night entails an embedded quotation, this time from John Burnet's translation of Parmenides:

> Mortals have made up their minds to name two forms, one of which they should not name, and that is where they go astray from the truth. They have distinguished them as opposite in form, and have assigned to them marks distinct from one another. To the one they allot the fire of heaven, gentle, very light, in every direction the same as itself, but not the same as the other. The other is just the opposite to it, dark night, a compact and heavy body. Of these I tell thee the whole arrangement as it seems likely; for so no thought of mortals will ever outstrip thee.[43]

Night in 'The Five Hindrances' is the scene not of communion through silence but of selfsameness through transgression and

[42] Malherbe, *Œuvres*. Ed. Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 23. An earlier line in the poem recalls 'Love in the Air': *nos amours* are "Amours…la plupart infidèles et feintes." Malherbe's complaint about the vanity of life *here below* is threaded into Prynne's evacuated complaint about life here below nothing.

[43] John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958: 176.

blindness: identity wipes out quality. There is no true "opposite" to Parmenides's fire of heaven, so he says, but only a verbal opposition contrived by overnice mortals gone astray; just so, there is no true opposite to the modern high street: neither "the wish…/ where we may / dwell as we would", still available in 'Moon Poem', nor Olson's Atlantic ocean, Yucatan, or human universe, will do for a workable antinomy. In 'Nothing Like Examples' the moon is too busy adapting to Harold Wilson's decimalisation of the British currency to waste its time acting the mirror of *Weltschmerz*. "The full moon flashes its Roman tinge and / prepares for new decimal butter."[44]

Pain, from being the *application* of others, becomes in 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder' a "banal" mimicry of a domestic *appliance*: television, the "conduit" matched by the "head film." Later in the poem we read:

> It is
> dear to be left
> calm in the face of the house and the night. If
> it is dark and cloudless, without stars, some
> friendly woman will blunder with the tap.
> No news can be less valued, by
> derisive acts
> of mercy nonetheless
>
> (*Poems* 152)

No news is not good news. The idea that we can simply *mute* the TV set is a new example of what Prynne in 1966 called "moral excitement." But the migraine we get from *not* muting the news is banal. The little run of homiletic dactyls–"calm in the face of the house and the night"–is the echo of that banality captivated in versification. It juts into a passage of prosody characteristic of *The White Stones*, a prosody still confidently shaped under the pressure of argument and to the end of persuasion. The mounting pressure of argument is *released* into a stupefyingly familiar verse line, its music "pretty obviously untrue", as if the "culmination" toward which 'Moon Poem' insisted that we direct ourselves had turned out in fact to "flow" with a "sense of devoutness" after all. The final word "If" amplifies the prosodic bathos by seeming to be tacked carelessly on to

[44] *Poems*. 150-2, 163, 167.

the end of the line. The dactyls make a nice set, a polished verse for a polished sentiment, and the hanging monosyllable that trespasses into their unit seems indifferently to be where it now is rather than anywhere else (compare the *tie* in 'L'Extase de M. Poher': "Tie / that up, over for next time, otherwise there / is a kind of visual concurrence").

The letdown of "some friendly woman" blundering in her kitchen and mucking up *le silence* makes more than a clash of tones between locutions; instead her image unconceals the bathos already packed into the apparently more serious and lyrical locution that runs into it.[45] Each line is a negative prism to its adjunct. What seem like moments of outright, obvious bathos in this poem, and throughout *Brass*, are only ambiguously contrary to lyric. That is, they are properly contrary only if we ignore what in the light of their own retrospect becomes the differently modulated bathos of the lines they appear to contradict. The bathos flows upward and backward like dominoes on film in rewind. Prynne's argument may be that we do ignore those different modulations of bathos, because we're too busy squeezing the lines for metaphysics and consolation to notice their hooks and sinkers; or maybe that lyric and bathos are non-identical only on condition that they are exchangeable? "We rise / and fall with a hedge-trimmer's finesse', sings 'The Five Hindrances.'[46] Not to hear contradiction at all, as the "dark and cloudless" night slides into the washing up, would be despair; always or decisively to hear it would be to spin it in a *rondeau* of sentimentality. The status and identity of bathos must be re-specified after every line, and *then* before it. The possibility of recognising true contradiction rather than its remakes and substitutes depends on getting the vectors of corruption right.

'L'Extase de M. Poher' is nearer to the poems of 1966-7 than 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder,' if only in the single respect that it does organise even the most disparate and ambiguously contrary of its language materials in a rhetorical series that sets up a working escalator to its terminal diagnosis. It is an argumentative poem that does argument, not one that argumentatively makes a barrier against

[45] In a letter to *The English Intelligencer*, 14th March 1968 Prynne writes: "sound in its due place is as much true as knowledge." The "friendly woman" making the wrong sound in her kitchen is in her place at the domestic *non plus ultra*.

[46] *Poems* 163.

capitulation to argument, like 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder'. But like 'The Bee Target on his Shoulder' it is difficult because its rhetorical series and its propositional series are not parallel or concurrent. Readers should not just trace a line through its propositions, joining one to the next, trusting that they will lead and follow on from each other; rhetoric is driven on through and over a complex series of reticulations of heterodyne, slipped, incomplete and scrambled propositions.

The central proposition in 'L'Extase de M. Poher' is given in condensed form by the title of the poem. Simply put, or as simply as possible, at least, the proposition is that modern "political rhapsody", as the poem later names it, is the latest mutation of the shamanic paroxysm whose performance keeps open a channel to menacing, vengeful and stupefying divinity; and that "M. Tout-le-Monde", the preeminent incarnation of bourgeois universalism, is today the *figure* of that channel. In *into a model question* is *tout le monde*, scrambled and anagrammatic: voting is the stub of cosmogeny. But Prynne doesn't ramp up lamentation, he evacuates it. As "poetic gabble" and "the / gallant lyricism of the select" are hurried out the soul's discursive fire door, the vacuum fills with what in 'Viva Ken' is called "the factual remains / of desire": "rubbish" and "verbal smash-up". But this is not the poet shoring ruins against his fragments. It is a way to model lyric, to make a language for *fact without desire*. The poem implicitly announces a shift in the moralism of knowledge away from anything like eidetic phenomenology, with its bracketing of affectivity along with ontic commitments, toward the project of a lyric beyond subjectivity, that is, beyond memory, appetite, greed, and all the other consolations for predatoriness that make up the spiral curve of bourgeois autobiography, a project that would come into full view only much later in Prynne's work.

"Ecstasy" is a term Prynne knew in its anthropological usage current in 1960s studies of shamanism. In a letter to Olson in 1964 Prynne mentions that he is reading Mircea Eliade's *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, and gives an excerpt from that book in which Eliade claims (music to Olson's ears, no doubt) that "all mythology is ontophany" and that myths "reveal the structure of reality and the multiple modalities of being in the world."[47] The first English translation of Eliade's *Shamanism. Archaic techniques of ecstasy* was published that same

[47] Letter to Olson, 17th April 1964.

year, 1964. As its title suggests, the study proposes that shamanism is "a technique of ecstasy." Ecstasy of the shamanic type is in turn a form of social "election" through which the shaman ritually distinguishes himself from the members of the community over which he demonstrates his right to power.[48] The shaman's ecstasy is a ritual performance, a prolonged, difficult and ultimately submissive conflict with spirits whose sway over the fortune of the community can be influenced by this intervention alone–not through the *show* of ecstasy but through the ecstatic *experience*.

> What differentiates a shaman from any other individual in the clan is not his possessing a power or a guardian spirit, but his ecstatic experience.[49]
>
> What it is important to note now is the parallel between the singularization of objects, beings and sacred signs, and the singularization by "election," by "choice," of those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community.[50]
>
> Healer and psychopomp, the shaman is these because he commands the techniques of ecstasy–that is, because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky.[51]

"Election" was not used with this sense for the first time by Eliade. It was first proposed as a description of shamanic ritual by Leo Sternberg in an article published by the *Congrès International des Américanistes* in 1925, 'Divine Election in primitive religion.' Sternberg borrowed the term from theology.

[48] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic techniques of ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Arkana, 1989 [1964]), 4.
[49] *Ibid* 107.
[50] *Ibid* 32.
[51] *Ibid* 111.

> The term Election used as a *terminus technicus* in Christian theology is now used for the first time by me in an ethnological sense.[52]

Sternberg's account of the shamanic election process among native Americans is uncannily reminiscent of the media spectacle surrounding Poher's delayed announcement (finally made on the 12th May 1969) that he would *after all* stand in the coming French presidential elections:

> At first the elected one refuses to accept the burden bestowed upon him, persists in his decision, but eventually wavers; finally, exhausted by threats or tempted by promises of the spirit that has chosen him, he submits and enters upon an understanding with his protector, after which the fits usually subside and the sufferer recovers.[53]

Sternberg goes on to relate how "the moment when the actual office of the shaman begins" is "performed before an immense gathering of people, and accompanied by numerous offerings, shaman invocations, and a solemn ascension up specially appointed sacred trees to the skies."[54] *The Times* of 19th April 1969 (1) reported: "M. Poher's first public act [after assuming the interim presidency following the resignation of de Gaulle] was to drive to the Arc de Triomphe to lay a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a ceremony both brief and simple. M. Poher's quiet dignity and reserve since the victory of the "Noes" in the referendum became a certainty has already earned him the approval of the press and the public."

Prynne's title compresses two distinct references. The first is to the French election, the second is a scholarly reference to the techniques of shamanic ecstasy and election as described under their *terminus technicus* by contemporary anthropologists. Prynne wrote to Olson in 1964 about "the imaginative persistence of the great anagogic patterns"—that is, the patterns of spiritual and mystical

[52] Leo Sternberg, "Divine Election in primitive religion", *Congrès International des Américanistes. Compte-Rendu de la XXIe Session* (Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolg, 1925), 472.
[53] *Ibid* 474.
[54] *Ibid* 485-6.

enlightenment–into modernity.[55] What the shaman is "elected" to is a condition of intense, purified awareness, in which the true significance of natural objects (what anthropology in the 1960s called their "mythic" significance) can be known and announced. The "persistence" of this "anagogic pattern" was for Prynne in 1964 manifest in Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in particular in the radical emphasis Heidegger placed on intense perception of *Seiende* or entities, reduplicated by Olson in his frequent demand that we not simply *look at* but instead actively *see* the world around us–that is, that we perceive it with what Eliade calls "greater intensity."[56] So much for 1964. In 1970, this anagogic pattern has found its electable representative in M. Tout-le-Monde, whose intense perception of the destiny of France (or of spaceship earth) is broadcast to an awestruck superstitious tribe in the media ritual of electoral propaganda. The shaman's ecstatic insight into the meanings of natural objects is revisited in the form of an exam rubric, our instruction to "list / the plants as distinct / from"–but there the instruction is abandoned, under the automatic pressure, we might guess, of a lateral cognition (distraction) hinted at by the grammarless, disconnected word "lateral" itself (ll.19-21).

There is a lot more to 'L'Extase de M. Poher' than the shadow thrown over it by its difficult title. More obviously than other poems in *Brass*, it lays down an argumentative pathway. The poem is

[55] Letter to Olson, 7th January 1964. Prynne quotes from J.A. Comenius, *Naturall Philosophie Reformed* on the primal function of light in the universe and its distinction from spirit and matter; he then comments: "I am always surprised at the imaginative persistence of the great anagogic patterns like these. A man could find himself and his own small coherence in these terms, if he kept accurately to the mythic fact and didn't allow his vision to go flatteringly cloudy." This letter predates 'The Numbers,' in which the phrase "the / state of our own / coherence" is reminiscent of the "own small coherence" here described. *Poems*. 12.

[56] See e.g. *The Maximus Poems* [I.29], ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1983), p. 33: "what kills me is, how do these others think / the eyes are / sharp? by gift? bah by love of self? try it by god? ask / the bean sandwich." An instructive comparison is with Schleiermacher's description of "religion" as that which "strives, to be sure, to open the eyes of those who are not yet capable of intuiting the universe, for every one who sees is a new priest, a new mediator, a new mouthpiece," in *On Religion. Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 28. What religion does for the eyes in Schleiermacher's account, poetry does for them in Olson's.

organised into pseudostrophic divisions of statements separated by the words that stand in isolation between them at ll.7, 31, 44 and 64, "No", "Weather", "yet" and "what", for which a central indentation is reserved that the last line of the poem also shares. This last line therefore looks as if it ought to be another moment of division between statements, rather than an end to them. The phrase "model question" is shuddering with echoes. Is this a question we have to build for ourselves like a model tank or donkey, following the instructions laid out in a leaflet that comes in the box? Is it a "model" question in the same sense that a child might be praised for his model behaviour, setting a good example? What can we make of the echo "model village", the name given to brightly-painted toy suburban idylls found in beachside amusement arcades? Is it some such "town" into whose hands the poem instructs us to put our "choice", as the voters of France put theirs in the hands of Paris? The phrase "model question" is preceded in the same sentence by several other matching or nearly matching nominative constructions:

> 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.*
>
> (Italics added.)

The sentence is pressing and impetuous, and yet patiently enough put together. The chain of ascending semi-colons–repeated in *Not-You* in 1993[57]–creates a template for insistence, as if the voice were mounting into the scripted summing-up of a political speech, hammering home its key message. The word "question" stands in emphatic relief against the words that end the five lines prior to it: "is", "the", "in", "the", "turned". It ends the last variation of the main and repeated grammatical block of the sentence, a singular abstract noun preceded in the first four instances by a superlative adjective or group of adjectives. The adjectives are locked into rhetorical apposition, so that "most intricate" seems superlative in the same way and with the same moral force of utterance that "entire" and

[57] 'Foaming metal sits not far in front' *Poems* 385.

"ultimate sexual" and "whole" must be. The effect is openly rhetorical and constructed. The verses are asyndetic: there are no conjunctions between the adjectival subclauses, because, we must think, their sheer force of utterance is connection enough, for us. The argument dumped on us has had its logical development compressed out of it, so that it rests on the authority of the speaking voice alone. Poetry here resembles political speech-writing, so that Andrew Ross's discovery of an "ethics of speech" in *Brass* and in English poetry following after *Brass* has an unintended irony: the "ethics of speech" is given in the rhetoric of a speech-writer.[58]

The last sentence advances toward its "question" through a string of emphatic propositions, each of which has "rubbish" as its grammatical subject. Ian Patterson has described this climax very persuasively:

> the model question with which the poem ends is still never stated, so that the shape of it runs back into the body of the poem which retrospectively forms a topology of the absence, or the question's rhetorical form.[59]

Patterson distinguishes this effect from the apparently similar effect of some poems in *The White Stones*, noticing in 'L'Extase de M. Poher' "a more frenetic lack of statement" than could be vainly hunted after in Prynne's earlier work; but his useful description of "a topology of absence" (in this case of the "model question" itself) might equally well apply to 'The Numbers', in which we are never told what exactly is meant by "the whole thing" that confronts us as an imperative at the beginning of the poem.[60] What is the "shape" that Patterson describes running back into the poem from its climax? Partly it is the unarticulated challenge in the word "question" itself.

[58] Andrew Ross, "The Oxygen of Publicity" *Poetics Journal* 6 (1986): 62-71 [67]. The poem of Prynne's that most nearly suggests an "ethics of speech" is 'Star Damage at Home' from *The White Stones*, not any poem, as Ross thinks, from "*Brass* (1971) onward." See *Poems* 108-9: "we must mean the / entire force of what we shall come to say."

[59] Ian Patterson, "'the medium itself, rabbit by proxy': some thoughts about reading J.H. Prynne" in *Poets on Writing, 1970-1991*, ed. Denise Riley (London: Macmillan, 1992), 238-9.

[60] Patterson, "'the medium itself, rabbit by proxy': some thoughts about reading J.H. Prynne", 238.

The challenge that comes at the poem's end is latent in the text that led up to it. If what we end up with is a question, we may like to assume that the answer must be somewhere in the verses that got us to it: so back we must go, trampling through the rubbish to look for it. The shape of the poem then seems like the trajectory of the question's emergence; unless, that is, the thumping rhetorical clamour of the question itself–its speech-writerly noisiness–warns us that there may not in fact be any model question worth putting together (a line-ending in the following poem in *Brass*, 'The Five Hindrances,' might strengthen that suspicion. Line 15 enjambs on the phrase "It cannot turn," which is the contradictory echo of the penultimate line in 'L'Extase de M. Poher').[61] These two possibilities–that the question is latent throughout the poem and that there is no question worth assembling–neither of which yet discloses what the question itself is, are perhaps one and the same. If the "shape" of the final question does run back into the poem as a whole, then part of it must run through the grid pattern repeated three times: at ll. 11-16, 20-25 and 34-39. The lines are arranged in a vertical and horizontal criss-cross. Their indented start-positions are rigid:

who is the occasion
  now what
is the question in
  which she
what for is a version
  of when, i.e.
[...]
the plants as distinct
  from lateral
front to back or not
  grass "the most
successful plant on our
  heart-lung by-
[...]
the thermal bank: here
  credit 92°
a/c payee only, reduce to
  now what

[61] *Poems*, 163.

laid out in the body
sub-normal

The poem from *Kitchen Poems* which this grid implicitly travesties is again 'Die A Millionaire'. Prynne argued in that poem that poetry must be a kind of knowledge of an order radically different from the knowledge of the econometrist whose metonym is "the grid":

> The grid is another sign, is knowledge in appliqué-work actually strangled & latticed across the land; like the intangible consumer networks[62]

Here in 'L'Extase de M. Poher' is the diagram of that same grid, supervening on the prosody of argument. Prynne may have had in mind a remark by Robert S. Brumbaugh, evidently intended as a rebuke to Alfred North Whitehead, from the introduction to his text of Plato's *Parmenides*:

> the technique of linear and regular grid con-struction fits naturally with a culture stressing technology and a philosophy tending to equate reality with process.[63]

The language that comprises the grid is discontinuous but not fragmentary, if "fragment" means what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, or Eliot, meant by it.[64] On the contrary, this is language in stiffly limited, rigid reticulation, precisely organised, violently subordinated to its own graphic organising principle. What it communicates–its offer of *communion* between reader and author–is damaged beyond recuperation: it jolts from one scrap of verbal smash-up to another, as if the poem were indifferent to whatever schedule for interpretation (or even basic sense-making) the reader might want to stick to. Line 37 is kept only by its visual hiatus from being a kind of flickering joke

[62] *Poems*, 14.
[63] Robert S. Brumbaugh, *Plato on the One. The Hypothesis in the Parmenides* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961), 3. Prynne included this book in his bibliography "on time" for Ed Dorn. Brumbaugh seems to aim his comment at Whitehead's *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1929).
[64] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's influential account of the fragment is *The Literary Absolute. The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988).

about the predicament into which the reader is shunted by all this sub-prosody: stretched to an affront it asks, "now what."

I use the word "damaged" in order to point another comparison with Prynne's earlier work. In his 1969 review article on Olson's *Maximus IV, V, VI* Prynne had described as "the critical necessity" the task "to keep the moral structure of immediate knowledge from damage during its transition to the schedule of city-settlement."[65] Olson had reimagined this necessity, so Prynne thought, by avoiding the "panic-stricken encyclopedic impulse…which merely confronts the decline and splittings of awareness." The late *Maximus* poems are "not secondary assemblage but primary writing"; they are "a lingual and temporal syncretism, poised to make a new order."[66] The grids in 'L'Extase de M. Poher' are the "opposite" of this: planks of language assembled and screwed down into a "lattice", "knowledge / in appliqué-work actually strangled." But they are not lattices of despair. If Prynne is confronting the decline and splittings of awareness, specifically the decline of the intense awareness described by anthropologists in their accounts of the shamanic ecstasy, the confrontation is not, in 'L'Extase de M. Poher', a platform for lamentation. If we could reconstitute the whole, unsplit locutions that are broken up in the grid, it appears likely they would be inquiring or pedagogical, as in the first grid they are most obviously; we might catch at least the drift of some discourse on "a new order." But like the editor confronted with the lacunae of a damaged text, such as Parmenides's fragments, we must try to reconstruct the whole locutions in which these scraps might once have lodged, an inevitably speculative effort that will be a waste of time if the text it restores to integrity turns out to be a waste of time. That is, the value of the hypostatised "whole" text is uncertain throughout our reconstruction of it; and the value of our efforts to reconstruct it is uncertain too. The poem is punning on philology, specifically on textual editorship, as a tradition of making order and meaning from rubbish. The inclusion in the last grid of "a/c payee only" makes the reconstruction effort seem very unlikely to be worthwhile: it casts back over the previous sets of "appliqué-work" the suspicion that they may all be the stubs and detritus not of knowledge but of transactions of one

[65] J.H. Prynne, "Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*" *The Park* 4/5 (1969): 64.
[66] Prynne, "Charles Olson, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI*", 66.

kind or another. Reconstruction of the language of the grids into the language of speech and knowledge threatens to be the construction of a bin full of receipts. *Alethiea* is the way to the landfill site.

This is a "question" that the poem takes for a theme. What "rubbish" is pertinent and essential? All of it? The concept of it? Is rubbish the sum of these language scraps, a kind of ersatz "whole" done in "appliqué-work" made out of whatever remains we cling to and carry on us into the real "whole" of the culture to which we are "no longer instrumental": "culture in "this" sense"? The opposition between the deictic articles "this" and "that" which had been so important to Prynne in 1967, as one of the basic linguistic indicators of presence and distance and their relation to possession and estrangement, is broken down: "this" sense of culture is *that* from which we are now excluded, or rather, that to which we are not able to contribute. That life you live.

What is "this" culture? The question seems to ask for a definite answer. Answering it means bearing in mind the synonymy of *rubbish* and *refuse*, and then–as at many points throughout *Brass*–turning back to the poem in *The White Stones* or *Kitchen Poems* whose proposal is being parodied or satirised. The poem is in this case the last in *Kitchen Poems*, 'A Gold Ring Called Reluctance.' There we read:

> Fluff, grit, various
> discarded bits & pieces: these are the
> genetic patrons of our so-called condition.[67]

The proposition that ends *Kitchen Poems* is that these "bits & pieces" are the food of our *interest*, which is in turn a kind of "metabolic regulator" of the psycho-physical subject–"(what I / now mean by "we")"–which Prynne names as "discretion." We are, we bodies of flesh and bone wrapped in skin, a literal discretion. Prynne is again referring to what he calls our "extent" or the "limits" of ourselves, within which we are the discrete "private / matter" produced by "changes of pace and childhood", that is, by our development through memory and private history.[68] Refuse has a difficult job in 'A

[67] Prynne, *Poems* 21.

[68] 'A Gold Ring Called Reluctance', *Poems* 21. The idea of discretion as a private matter is already rebutted in 'Star Damage at Home' from *The White Stones*. See *Poems*, 109: "I will not be led / by the mean- / ing of my / tinsel past or / this fecund hint / I merely live in."

Gold Ring Called Reluctance.' It is important to who we are that we dwell on "discarded bits & pieces" and that we find them "interesting"–that our attention is held by them and not diverted constantly toward new commodities whose "literalness thrives unchecked." The latter are the stuff of our commercial separation, compared by Prynne to the nucleated cell structure of a gland. The cupidity of consumerism is a kind of mass violence: "the splintered / naming of wares creates targets for want / like a glandular riot, and thus want / is *the* most urgent condition." Refuse is what escapes this consumer riot by being valueless in it (in 'L'Extase de M. Poher' (l.66) refuse is crushed, trodden on and trampled, or perhaps *produced by* this urban stampede, rather than by the quasi-magical action of "reluctance" alone). It is whatever we no longer want. As such it has for Prynne the special status of a "check" against the thriving literalness of commodity production: the unwanted object is an objective limit of our "so-called" and "most urgent" condition. But refuse is produced as such by our refusals, such as the scripted refusal that occurs near the end of 'A Gold Ring Called Reluctance', sounding like a well-meaning bit of health advice:

> The white pills have no mark on them &
> the box extols three times daily, before meals.
> But the meals are discretion. We can eat
> slowly. [...]
>
> Have
> you had enough? Do have a little more?
> It's very good but, no, perhaps I won't.
>
> (*Poems* 23)

Nothing is *refuse* until we don't want it: our discretion makes it so, and discretion is who we are, or might be, if "want" were no longer permitted to remain "*the* most urgent condition." This is one kind of refuse (but it is not yet "rubbish": that word is the bathetic synonym reserved for *Brass*, bathetic because it lacks the etymological complex connoted by "refuse" and so forfeits the "hinterland of implications" opened up by the latter).[69] We make refusals because we are reluctant

[69] "Once a poem gets written and I have located a word which this poem has given to me–I've won out of the English language another word for my small vocabulary of words that really mean and matter to me–back to the

to make settlements and compromises. Reluctance is therefore considered by Prynne as a form of resistance, tied, in this poem, with its repeated references to consumption, to the idea of control over the needs that ought to be recognised as most basic to the body, which in 1966 (when the poem was first published)[70] were supposed somehow to be the needs that ought to be recognised as most basic to "who we are". In 'L'Extase de M. Poher' the uses of "rubbish" are less obvious, but its importance is nonetheless claimed more loudly. The moral climax is given in the syntax of a recapitulation ending a political broadcast: "Rubbish is etc; *etc*; *etc*…" Earlier in the poem we are told that "any other rubbish is mere political rhapsody, the / gallant lyricism of the select, breasts & elbows" (ll.62-3). Any rubbish, that is, other than the rubbish of the three discarded lines immediately prior to these two:

> 1. Steroid metaphrast
> 2. Hyper-bonding of the insect
> 3. 6% memory, etc
>
> (ll. 59-61)

The last item is thrown away before it is finished: "etc" puts an end to it. Poetry is numbers, and this list qualifies as poetry by the most literal means available. It shares an indented left-margin with the subclauses ranged in rhetorical apposition and distinguished by three semi-colons at ll.69-71; the two blocks or tercets have what Prynne calls at l.43 "a kind of visual concurrence." These three lines, ll.59-61, comprise a *tercet* only by a satirical minimum of crude resemblance, a resemblance which makes them icons for the dead end of neo-platonic numerical theory. The presentation of the lines under the sign of poetry is a gesture sarcastic against poetry itself. They cap with a meaninglessly supercilious "etc" a *longue durée* of idealist thinking about rhythm and number flowing back to and out from Augustine's tract on poetic numbers *De Ordine*, whose main tenet Carol Harrison summarises:

etymological dictionary: where does it come from, what does it originally mean, what great hinterland of implications lies behind this perhaps quite ordinary word?" J.H. Prynne interviewed by Peter Orr in *The Poet Speaks*, a series produced by the recorded sound section of the British Council in London, 1963.

[70] *The English Intelligencer*, 1st series, 1966, 141-3.

> Poetry as rhythmical, accented, numerically proportioned feet is given a place…as rational and as leading the man who studies it to the rationality which gave it structure. Such is the ascent of the soul through the liberal discipline of rhythm and number in De Ordine–"Thus, poets were begotten of reason," Augustine comments here.[71]

Prynne's tercet is "numerically proportioned" by the barest of minumum qualifications: it is a numbered list. It is not clear how the items in the list are related to each other, except that each one has a use and significance elsewhere, outside poetry, and each one seems strikingly out of place and obnoxious in a poem. Geoff Ward describes in Prynne's work since *Brass* "a massive act of restitution, or a new constitution, of all language as open to use."[72] This seems like a plausible account, until we wonder how exactly ll.59-61 of 'L'Extase de M. Poher' are "open to use" or reconstituted into members of an accessible whole language. They seem instead to have intruded into the poem, or to have been slung there, and all poetry can do (or want to do) is to itemize them. They are rubbish, but rubbish which nonetheless leads the reader who studies it to the rationality which gave it structure: in this case, the mimicked rationality of an instrumental list which belongs to a context of information which needs no comment or explanation. The rationality of market-research, perhaps, for which the "discipline" of numerical presentation is dictated by the logic of ranking.

Poets are begotten of reason, Augustine thought: their whole study is the rational ordering of language into rational poetic forms. Art had to be essentially rational and not instinctive or imaginative, and poetry must work most deeply on the rational mind and not on the senses or imagination, because all art is the presence and reflection in miniature of the greater rationality of the created universe. Our experience of "harmony" and "unity" in art is a proof of where it came from: in every earthly design there shines the *ratio* of

[71] Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 27. Cf. 29: "music finds its ideal form not in performance but in knowledge of numerical theory in the mind."

[72] Geoffrey Ward, "Nothing but Mortality: Prynne and Celan" in *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, eds. Anthony Easthope and John O. Thompson (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991), 139-52 [146].

the whole universe. Art is given to us so that we can perceive within and then *through* its rationality the rationality of God's creation. This meant for Augustine that the nightingale could not be artful, because "it isn't trained in the liberal discipline."[73] To be a poet is to know the rationality of the universe, which for Augustine is a form of knowledge that must be acquired but which is then manifest whenever we "use reason": "art is a sort of reason, and those who use art use reason…whoever cannot use reason does not use art."[74] A verse, Augustine tells us, "is generated by ratio rather than authority."[75]

Meter is important to this doctrine, since counting and the use of numbers enables us to apprehend the "proportion" of one thing to another, and this basic apprehension leads on to the apprehension of the harmony and proportionateness of all created things in the universe, which is to say, their *unity as reason.* Poetry is both an image and an instance of that unity:

> the unity you love can be effected in ordered things by that alone whose name in Greek is analogía and which some of our writers have called proportion.[76]

Augustine says that the ear "rejects and condemns" unreasonable meter. But rejection by the ear is neither autonomous nor spontaneous. Reason dictates it.[77] In its turn, the soul is "made better" when it "turns away from the carnal senses and is reformed by the divine numbers of wisdom."[78]

Augustine's *De Musica* says in prose a great deal of what Prynne's 'The Numbers' says in numbers. The laws it discovers in the harmony of poetic numbers are, like the "esteem" we might feel for our newly repossessed condition of existence in 'The Numbers'

[73] *The Fathers of the Church* Vol.4, *Writings of Saint Augustine* Vol.2, *De Musica*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1947), 176.
[74] *De Musica*, 178.
[75] *De Musica*, 222.
[76] *De Musica*, 200.
[77] "…this power of approval and disapproval is not created in my ears, when I hear the sound. The ears are certainly not otherwise accessible to good sounds than to bad ones," *De Musica*, 327.
[78] *De Musica*, 333.

and throughout *Kitchen Poems* and much of *The White Stones*, "already there in potential".

> [T]he ancient authors did not institute these things as if not already existing whole and finished in the nature of things, but found them by reasoning and designated them by naming them.[79]

The "corrationality" of all things–what Prynne calls "the / state of our own / coherence"–comes for Augustine from "the highest and eternal rule of numbers."[80] In 'The Numbers' it is we ourselves and not God who are "the ground for names," and we are under no instruction to turn away from the body and the senses, but must instead come into possession of our bodies as knowledge, since in our unity as "one man" we are limited by them (in *Brass* we are told that "life in / the ear is marked / by this throbbing uncertainty").[81] But the discovery of an harmonious and united whole through knowledge, and the power of knowledge to *name* that unity, is what *The White Stones* urges us to believe is still possible. Poetry is what discloses that unity as knowledge, for Prynne in *The White Stones* as for Augustine, with the crucial difference that for Prynne the knowledge is originally ours and not derivative from God, and we are not kept from it by our corporeality but must discover it there.

Is there anything like this neo-platonic view of poetry left in 'L'Extase de M. Poher'? The tercet at ll.59-61 is an antiprosodic emblem of the new numerical and proportional rationality of "culture in "this" sense", a culture in which our failure any longer to be "instrumental" may be a relief as well as a disaster. But failure to be instrumental in political culture at large might also count as evidence that the culture for which we *are* instrumental now belongs to us alone. Except that, of course, even it does not yet belong to us: it is the culture that we cannot yet get to, the margin of harmonious unity whose principle is the psychophysical unity of each one of us, the culture that Olson in his way demanded and that Prynne tried to define throughout *The White Stones*, and that we are barred from

[79] *De Musica*, 298.
[80] *De Musica*, 377.
[81] 'Wood Limit Refined' *Poems*, 164. The isolated line "the ear is marked" puns on the tagging of cattle and livestock for identification by farmers.

because of its incessant contradiction by "the unwitty circus" in which we do and can live. That is to say, both the media circus and also, by etymological connotation, the *unknown* at the circumference of capitalist depredation. No longer able to believe that this contradiction can be surmounted through the power of imagination, Prynne says in 1971 that we should just "collide" with it "head-on" (l.48). Rubbish remains, as in 1966, outside the exclusive whole of consumer culture, and is still essential, but the proposition that tells us so is cut with an "edge of rhetoric," to borrow a phrase from 'A New Tax on the Counter-Earth', which also tells us that "the conviction of merely being / right" has "marched into the patter of balance."[82] We look *slowly* at the "discarded bits & scraps" in 'A Gold Ring Called Reluctance', and only when "slowness is / interesting" are we resistant to the urgent, insect condition of want. That resistance is possible for us, we need only make a good enough choice. But in 'A New Tax on the Counter-Earth', "the moral drive isn't / quick enough."[83] Resistance can no longer mean self-exclusion through definition of a zone of moral austerity, not only because moralism has slowed down, but because we are not included in "this" culture in the first place. Prynne's reply to the "would-be alien" in *The White Stones* is to tell him that he is at home whether he likes it or not. *Brass* is the rivet and volta: we're excluded whether we like it or not, but that is precisely how "we are at home." That place now has "an ultimate sexual point": it is neither eternal nor cosmic, but its material substrate is the *end of our desire*, hilarious absolute daybreak wiping out the solemn provisional night and stars over the surface of the earth "laid out in rubbish." Collision is the new reluctance, and only the "poetic gabble" which doesn't fail to collide against the rationality that smothers and rebuts it will "survive." But this too is a proposition mounted in rhetoric we cannot easily trust, in this case a kind of hard talk flashing its overtones of social Darwinism, telling us to keep our lyric imaginations fit or go under.

If the "ultimate sexual point" is the *end* of the bliss of ejaculation, then the "model question" that comes at the end of the poem may itself be more rubbish, semen thrown out as the slag of ecstasy. The ecstasy of M. Tout-le-Monde ends together with "the whole place" at this ultimate sexual point, after its grids and numerical lists of

[82] *Poems*, 172.
[83] *Poems* 21, 172.

informatic detritus, after its edges into rhetoric and ode-like spans of repudiation, in *poetry*. The transhistorical unity of shamanic election with what Prynne called "the tragic antics" of M. Poher is sanctioned by the adoption of volatile and unstable bathos as an ersatz for neo-platonic *analogía*.[84] Ugly work, but the only way to make sure our poetic gabble survives. Unity is unity by default and coercion: *lyric as text* harassed into its totality by the intrusions of dissonant stubs and grids that destroy the integrity of syntax and argument in the muted interrogation and echo chamber. Not *analogous* to that harassed and coerced text, but only in fantasy isomorphic with it, the individual life under capital models the question of its possibility on the catwalk of that shattered dogma piled under foot.

[84] Letter to Dorn, 1st July 1970: "You may have noticed that the incomparably noble M. Poher, whose tragic antics in the French presidential elections were so brutally misreported, reincarnated himself as Edward Heath and was triumphantly embraced by the British populace."