

HEIGH HO: A PARTIAL GLOSS OF *WORD ORDER*

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J.H. Prynne, *Word Order*. Kenilworth, Warwickshire, England: Prest Roots Press, 1989. Letterpress, wrappers, 24pp.¹

Among the more interesting and learned exchanges retrievable from the archives of the UKPOETRY listserv at the University of Miami Ohio, was that between Peter Riley and Neil Pattison in March 2009, occasioned by J.H. Prynne's published commentary on Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper". Peter Riley there took issue with Prynne's tacit support of the contention that "During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, vocal music – that is, music allied to words, was understood as the paradigm case for music in general. It was through heightening verbal signification that music itself acquired meaning."² This contention Prynne associates in general with Wordsworth's argument in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry properly "contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents" and in particular with the complex relationship between 'The Solitary Reaper' and work song and ballad – for the solitary reaper sings her undeciphered lyric as she "cuts, and binds the grain."³ Pattison and Riley cite period

¹ The reprints in successive issues of *Poems* reproduce the formatting of the first edition exactly, and it may therefore be inferred that the first edition benefitted from the poet's close involvement in its design.

² Prynne cites this passage from Nicholas Cook and Nicola Dibben, 'Musicological Approaches to Emotion', in Patrik N. Juslin and John A. Soloboda, eds. *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), p47, in J.H. Prynne, *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and Others*. Cambridge: privately printed, 2007, p12.

³ William Wordsworth, 'The Solitary Reaper' l.5. All references to this poem cite the text reproduced in J.H. Prynne, *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and others* (Cambridge: privately printed, 2007). The text of 'The Solitary Reaper'

authorities to support and to contradict the central contention that work song was broadly understood to be the *fons et origo* of music and that music's continuing force depended on maintaining a close relationship between music and lyric. Although Peter Riley gets the better of the historical argument, Wordsworth's poem clearly constitutes a claim to ground ambitious lyric in the natural music of a people and a place, and to ground solitary musing in collective experience: "The music in my heart I bore, | Long after it was heard no more."⁴

Prynne's seeming adherence to the Wordsworthian position in this 2007 commentary is of the greatest interest for those who follow his poems. Since this mode of grounding is consistent with the discernably Heideggerian tenor of Prynne's writing of the 1960s, it suggests a continuity in his thought traceable from *Day Light Songs* (1968) to *Word Order* (1989) to the disquisition on Wordsworth; indeed, it might suggest that *Field Notes* presents an elaborately elliptical commentary on one aspect of Prynne's poetic practice:

we breathe the
same motions of habit
some part of the sky
is constant, that old
tune, Sonny Boy

Foot, how you press
me to keep that
old contact alive⁵

– or as Hölderlin wrote: "immer besteht ein Maas | Allen gemein" ("there's always a measure | Common to all").⁶ An explicit link to both Hölderlin and Heidegger is the title of the contemporaneous *Voll*

is presented on a folded leaf inserted at the back of the book, numbered as p.135.

⁴ 'The Solitary Reaper' ll. 31-32.

⁵ From *Day Light Songs* (1968), *Poems* (2005) pp.29-30.

⁶ From 'Brot und Wein'/'Bread and Wine' in Friedrich Hölderlin, *Odes and Elegies* tr. Nick Hoff. (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008), parallel text pp132/133.

Verdienst, derived from Hölderlin's rhapsodic prose fragment 'In Lieblicher Blaue,'⁷ There appears to be a direct line connecting Wordsworth, Heidegger, these lines from *Day Light Songs* and *Word Order*. *Word Order* does however confront the danger of seeking to retrieve a 'natural' music extremely sharply; it puts Heidegger in the frame with concentration camps. This drastic testing does not destroy or repudiate a claim for lyric's intimacy with common experience, but instead clearly distinguishes Prynne's understanding of that intimacy from Heidegger's and reveals the distinction to have been there from the start. *Word Order* is consistent with the wayfaring poems of *The White Stones* in rejecting the fateful Heideggerian romance of parochially rooted language, while asserting the link between truthful lyric language and the physically consonant rhythms of work and suffering across time and space – or at least asserts that such a consonance might be possible and even tenable as an account of how lyric works.

Word Order is an anguished text arriving at no stable conclusion; it is in fact a cycle, or perhaps a verbal astrolabe given the number of bodies orbiting across it. Therefore the further question arises whether the considerably later *Field Notes* does not in its frank claims revert to an early position. Maybe *Field Notes* even overcompensates in its glosso-hectic extent, betraying an uneasy consciousness of the risks an intricate poetry takes of breaking the bond of body and work claimed to be vital to the special performativity of lyric. Far from it: it is my strong impression that despite an up-to-date scholarly apparatus, the argument of *Field Notes* around work song and around what Charles Olson called proprioception, now extended into a less local ecological poetics, is contemporary with or precedes *Word Order* chronologically. Indeed the specific metaphorical domain of the *Field Notes* discussion shares much with *Word Order* in (for instance) its

⁷ Hölderlin's sentence runs: "Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnet der Mensch auf dieser Erde", that is, in Michael Hamburger's translation, "Full of acquirements, but poetically, man dwells on this earth." (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems & Fragments*, tr. Michael Hamburger. London: Anvil Press Poetry 1994, pp.714-715.) See also Martin Heidegger, "...Poetically Man Dwells...", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, tr. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row 1971), p.225. Note that this fragment first appeared (in prose form) in Wilhelm Waiblinger's novel *Phaeton* (1826) and the alleged manuscript is lost – an apt provenance for this fetishised text of 'dwelling'.

references to sea shanties, conductors' batons etc.. Therefore in now issuing the Wordsworth commentary, Prynne presumably is making public in another register certain claims developed in his verse and identifiable there from the beginning.

Reading a selection from *Word Order* to an audience at the second Pearl River Poetry Conference in Guangzhou in 2008, Prynne explicitly connected the title to the word order of the German language, but also to ideas of order historically associated with German philosophy and politics. Saturated with rage and black irony, Poem 1 brings into collision several different word orders; word order present in different *forms*. The poem begins with “our names” being inserted into forms, and the question “would we sing | out on sight or give in full” becomes central to the ensuing text: is singing out a reflex response to pain, is singing out a final concession, giving the torturer what he wants? Does what is done to the body necessarily induce a singing-out, and is Prynne here evidencing the concentration camp as the limit-case? Is singing out a profound rejoinder to fear? Does this imply in the blackest of double ironies that indeed *Work makes free*? An irony not foreign to concentration camp victims, like the two Dachau prisoners, Jura Soyfer and Herbert Zipper, who wrote the Dachaulied (Dachau Song) in 1938: “Be a man, comrade, | stay a human being, comrade, | do a good job, get to it, comrade, | for work, work makes you free!”⁸

The term “suspended” in the second stanza captures the Heideggerian concept ‘Alltäglichkeit’ often translated as ‘everydayness’, whereby human beings hold themselves apart from the world, from their ground. But this suspension by a rope “just above | the ground” plies three powerful possibilities: tightrope walking, death by hanging and a pit-cage prior to descent, this last a back-interpretation once the “wash-house” and a reference to pit-cage and winding-gear in Poem 4 (“rap her to bank”) have been absorbed. Nor is this all; later and in a less bleak register, ropes will be drawn into the force-field of the sea shanty, for two sea shanties will enter

⁸ “Sei ein Mann, Kamerad, | bleib ein Mensch, Kamerad, | mach ganze Arbeit, pack an, Kamerad, | denn Arbeit, Arbeit macht frei!”.
<http://www.scrapbookpages.com/DachauScrapbook/KZDachau/DachauSong.html>

the mix of *Word Order* and assume major importance for the claims this text makes for its own performativity.

But at this opening moment, “suspension” might remind a reader that for Heidegger animals are distinguished from human beings by a closed circle of benumbed behaviour, and that such numbness might also afflict human beings who have fallen technologically, who have no ground. In any event, the “closed circle” of the last stanza is deep-dyed in irony. Not only is the “closed circle” related to Heideggerian suspension, but also to the interpretative circle, that undermining of heuristics through recognition that an interpreter tends to create the object of interpretation. “The real world” and “in truth to tell” become bitterly sceptical formulae. But worse than this, for it may also be recalled that Schelling in the *Philosophy of Art* (1802-3) “suggests that the *universality* implicit in Greek mythology’s ability to ‘imagine’ (in the sense of making into an image) is only available in modern art to those artists who by their *individuality* are able to create ‘a closed circle of poetry [Poesie]’ (...), a personal mythology, from their limitation.”⁹ That being so, far from re-grounding the singer in a language of authenticity, to sing out may rather create a retreat, richly condensed, where one might rest content with the rumour that “the capital is reported to be quiet.” (Poem 1, final line)

Such an upholstered circle nonetheless coincides with the “circolo breve” of Eugenio Montale’s poem ‘Tempi Di Bellosuardo’. This ‘brief circle’ is bounded by death but filled with frenzied eroticism; the garden’s foliage is tremulously excited while simultaneously desolate. Poem 9 of *Word Order* beginning “With shaded glass” quotes ‘si muore sapendo’ from the second section of ‘Tempi di Bellosuardo’ beginning “Derelitte sul poggio”, and translates ‘con grida dai giardini pensili’ (“And shouts | from terraced gardens”) from the first section. The intimation of a road crash in Prynne’s second stanza, later to return brutally in the final poem of his cycle, parodies Montale’s lines

[...] è troppo triste
che tanta pace illumini a spiragli

⁹ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*. (Manchester: Manchester UP 1993), p105.

e tutto ruoti poi con rari guizzi
su l'anse vaporanti [...]

[...] it is too sad
that such peace should lighten by glints
and everything turn then with rare flashing
on the steaming bends [...]¹⁰

whose sadness finds its object in what escapes words – a relatively conventional lament for the unattainability of what is glimpsed in ‘rare flashes’. Bringing these intimations completely down to earth in “splinters of mica” Prynne wrenches the scenario so that “these flushes of traffic | arouse more urgently” and lead to “predictable gasps of joy”, a rare Ballardian moment, thus subjecting the passage from ‘Tempi Di Bellosguardo’ to an overlay consistent with Montale’s overlaying the exuberance-filled circle of the first part of his poem with the desolation of the second.

Much as Montale insists on adjusting the registers of life and death, of perturbation and desolation so they overlay and correspond, so Prynne’s closed circle fills to bursting while also anesthetized or packed with regulated bodies. What one critic writes of Montale could be applied equally to Prynne: “There is a tendency in his work towards a self-sufficient, autonomous poetic universe – not as an end in itself, but in an effort to balance the horror which he sees manifested in the real world by finding another dimension which is independent of that world.”¹¹ These are not alternate universes but the same universe; the same elements can be mined to produce instruments of ease and joy, or instruments of torment and death. Gas is everywhere. The poet’s garden and the “frigidari | dei pianterreni” of ‘Tempi Di Bellosguardo’ coincide with “the wash-house” of *Word Order*, and so the poet’s closed circle may re-purpose the darkest materials. Singing-out may turn to song, and the counterfactual universe flash with glimpses of other purposes.

¹⁰ Eugenio Montale, ‘Tempi di Bellosguardo’ in *Selected Poems* tr. Glauco Camson (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp.68-69.

¹¹ Susan Perschetz Machala, ‘The Path to an “Ordine Diverso”: Three Poems by Eugenio Montale’, *MLN* 89.1 The Italian Issue (Jan 1974): pp. 93-109, quoting from p.108.

It is time to respond to the more sinister undertones of this poem, the unavoidable thought that “the ethereal vapour” might refer to Zyklon B and “the wash-house” to the ante-chamber to the gas chamber. The “closed circle of poetry” in that German Romantic tradition whose aspirations are most vividly evoked through their loss’s mourning in the poems of Hölderlin, had installed the aesthetic as a separate order. Hence a tight alignment of closed circles: the closed circle of such a word order (poetic form), the closed circle of the bureaucratic form, the closed circle of numb and automatic living, and devastatingly the closed circle of the philosophical discourse which permitted Heidegger to hail Hitler. The rage of this first poem seems to be directed not only at the obvious target of Nazi reasoning and its consequences, but also at an aesthetic tradition – even as it declines to repudiate that tradition. This aesthetic’s consequences may well include a besotted inability to see outside the closed circle, “we heard them and it was | not in this word order” much as in *Into the Day*

[...] Touching that
halcyon cycle we were rested in ease
and respite from dismay [...]¹²

– but the line from *Word Order* continues “cannot be afraid.” That may represent a delusional state, but also an advantage. The closed circle may protect us from fear.

Why ‘Nazi reasoning’? Because in one sense Nazism grotesquely parodies Heideggerian reasoning, which is why Heidegger could be so gulled: it sought to heal the gap between nature and man marked in Kantian thought. But nature in this reasoning was a social-Darwinian force, and the imagined culture of classical Greece had nothing to do with it. The nature to which the Nazis demanded submission was a blindly deterministic force from which human beings were separated not by subsumption in administrative routine but pre-eminently by their ‘caritas’ – contrary to the long-term interests of the race and its ‘natural’ self-sustaining through culling and war. Although associated with Nazism as its most remorseless exponent, this had been a merely commonplace argument of Social Darwinism in the decades preceding the first world war, a catastrophe

¹² *Poems* (2005), p.202.

which might have been expected to put paid to such fantasies of racial hygiene. Social Darwinian logic lies I think behind the brief and robotically formulaic poems in *Word Order* (as from a phrase-book or a grammar), batting ‘nature’ and the adjective “natural” to and fro to conclude in Poem 8 “war is natural”, followed by the dropped-line afterthought “they are underneath”. Indeed they are, and death is natural too. This is scarcely the univen or restored nature Heidegger conceived: “It is the ground for history and art and for nature in the narrower sense. In the word Nature as it is used here, the echo still lingers of the earlier word φύσις, which is also equated with ζωή, translated by us as life. In early thought, the essence of life is not represented biologically but rather as φύσις, the emergent, that which arises.”¹³ The salient emergence in *Word Order* is vocal, and that forcibly, although force is not necessarily vicious. Otherwise, Heidegger’s nature remains distributed between closed circles (art, bureaucracy), by biology, by Christianity, and by the anachronistic logic of the struggle for survival. Poetry itself threatens to close off from collective endeavour, from the working world.

In *The White Stones* (1969) the closed circle is what you walk out of, a Heideggerian path. Not to make it sound like a stroll, for this is a particular practice of walking founded in the cosmology of finding your place. But by the time of ‘An Evening Walk’ in *Wound Response* (1974) a certain queasiness is felt, which then overtakes *High Pink on Chrome* the next year. Whereas in ‘An Evening Walk’ a trusted counterforce to the repulsive product of the land of “pork pies [...] in a jellied pyramid” flexes at the level of “his intact ankle”¹⁴, albeit an ankle apt to behave unpredictably, *High Pink on Chrome* tracks through a land taken over by industrial agriculture and big pharma. An evening walk is liable to rattle the immune system. By the time of *Down where changed* (1979) there is no possibility of exculpation for even the gentlest of earth’s beneficiaries:

The consumption of any product
is the destruction of its value
thus the land is cleared

¹³ Martin Heidegger, ‘Why Poets?’ in *Off the Beaten Track*, tr. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2002), p.208.

¹⁴ *Poems* (2005), p.227.

by the footprint of a quiet man¹⁵

How then to break the closed circle? The only option, according to *Word Order*, is with a blow. Regarding ‘blow’ it may be worth divulging that Prynne is a keen amateur recorder player, the proud possessor of a Dolmetsch instrument, and plays with astonishing aggression. He is the Albert Ayler of the recorder, and the final poem of *Word Order* is not too violent to describe his musical performance. But the blows of this poem refer chiefly to song, to work, to resuscitation, and to cruel ill use. I have discerned snatches from six songs in *Word Order*; doubtless there are more. They are presented here in order of appearance. Poem 4 has the line in German “wer soll das bezahlen”, that is, ‘Who’s going to pay?’, the title and punch-line of a drinking song whose chorus runs:

Wer soll das bezahlen,
wer hat das bestellt,
wer hat soviel Pinke-Pinke,
wer hat soviel Geld?

“Pinke-pinke”, that is ‘dosh’ or ‘moola’, shows up in Poem 17 (the penultimate poem in the sequence). Taken out of the beer hall, ‘Who’s going to pay’ assumes a disturbing historical resonance, not only with the murderous scapegoating of the 1930s but also with *Word Order*’s later allusions to *Measure for Measure* and with the jargon of stock market ‘adjustments’ (such a phrase as “set at par”). The reader of Prynne has learnt to trace financial jargon through the earlier sequence *Down where changed* (1979), the central poetic text of the period of Anglo-American monetarist deregulation. Perhaps it is historically consequential that Poem 4 also includes the rather enigmatic phrase “rap her to bank” from a coalminers’ song, representing the historical traditions defeated by financial ‘disciplines’ in the UK miners’ strike of 1984-5.

Rap Her to Bank

¹⁵ *Poems* (2005), p.308.

Chorus:

Rap her to bank, my canny lad,
Wind her away, keep turning.
The backshift men are ganning hame,
We'll be back here in the morning.

My father used to call the turn
When the last shift was ower.
And ganning outby you'd hear him cry,
"D'ye knaa it's after fower?"

Chorus

And when that awful day arrived,
The last shift for my father,
A fal of stones and broken bones,
But still above the clatter, he cried,

Final chorus:

Rap her to bank, my canny lad,
Wind her reet slow, that's clever.
This poor old lad has taken bad.
I'll be back here never.¹⁶

As for the phrase “rap her to bank”, the ‘bank’ is the mine’s surface, ‘rap’ is the knock given by the man in charge of the cage at the foot of the shaft that the cage is ready for hauling. Originally he knocked on the wall of the shaft but in later years a bell or buzzer was used.¹⁷ After the mid-1980s the line “I'll be back here never” would take on a haunted quality, the pits deserted. But Prynne’s poems do not allow an allusion to dilate. They move on. Within Poem 4 the force-field set up by the proximity of “wer soll das bezahlen” and “rap her to bank”

¹⁶ The song is in Northern English dialect, probably Geordie (Newcastle). ‘Canny’: a general epithet of approbation or satisfaction (in some parts pronounced *conny*), as in ‘Canny Newcastle’. ‘Backshift’: a shift that fills in between day and night workers, often overlapping the two, e.g. 4.00pm - 11.30pm. ‘Ganning hame’: Going home. ‘Outby’: toward the mine entrance or shaft and therefore away from the working. ‘Reet’ = ‘right’ (used in Northern English as an adverb to positively pre-qualify a verb).

¹⁷ Information from www.mudcat.org, a site hosting discussion threads on folksong.

imbues a line like “take a cut, in a cavity” with a disturbing multiple ambiguity. “Take a cut” might variously suggest the action of a privatisation consultant, a wound in the body of Christ (the poem begins “In the garden”) or a sarcastic challenge to inflict more damage, to strike at the heart. “Cavity” evokes open-heart surgery because the previous poem had ended “in cardiac shadow” so that its final line “the lights of common day” had summoned the archaic meaning of ‘lights’ as viscera. Merely to mention these things is to indicate how allusion works in Prynne’s poems; rather than advertising adherence to a literary tradition it marks the intensities encountered along language’s attentive waywardness.

Poem 5 begins with the haunting address “O you stormy”, which derives from an American sea shanty hard to resist quoting in full:

General Taylor

Well General Taylor gained the day
Walk him along, John, Carry him along
Well General Taylor he gained the day
Carry him to his bury’n ground

Chorus

Tell me way, hey, you stormy
Walk him along, John, carry him along
Tell me way, hey, you stormy
Carr-y him to his bury’n ground

We’ll dig h-is grave with a sil-ver spade
Walk him along, John, Carry him along
His shroud of the fin-est silk will be made
Carry him to his bury’n ground

Chorus

We’ll lower him down on a gol-den chain
Walk him along, John, Carry him along
On ev-ery inch we’ll car-ve his name
Carry him to his bury’n ground

Chorus

General Taylor he's all the go
Walk him along, John, Carry him along
He's gone wh-ere the stormy winds won't blow
Carry him to his bury'n ground

Like many sea shanties this derives from a ballad celebrating military prowess, a point made by Peter Riley who wonders whether such a basis for collective art would be entirely welcome to 'us' (and by implication to Prynne).¹⁸ The evidence of *Word Order* and the preoccupation with transhumance extending from *The White Stones* to *The Oval Window* suggests that more pastoral pursuits provide the exertive basis for the rhythmic community in which Prynne trusts. Some of the bleakness and distress of late Prynne may rise from outrage at the despoliation of the pastoral, not only through the agency of Monsanto and its ilk (although this might be a too-conventional liberal and anti-scientific gesture for Prynne) but also through the depredations of hi-tech weaponry where once shepherds watched their flocks by night: see *Triodes*.

¹⁸ "I can't see that this indicates anything more than that in the mid-18th Century in Britain some people were getting worried about poor quality texts set to attractive music by people like Handel. They always have been, for the problem is always there whether it's articulated or not, because music and poetry defer to different paradigms. I don't see anything developmental in this, as if it were not yet possible (or just becoming possible) to understand music as distinct from words. Or as said elsewhere in Field Notes that music was only valued as a factor of social events before the 19th Century, was not understood as a thing in itself.

Then what are we to do with a massive production over many centuries of purely instrumental music of the most complex and extended kind, or millennia of theoretical musical and musico-acoustic treatises which are not involved with text at all but mainly with proportion and harmony? And so on and so on... of course music was valued independently of text or occasion, as far back as you care to go. Indeed how otherwise do we understand "From Harmony, from heav'nly Harmony This universal frame began..." ?

And let's not forget that Alexander's Feast is also a hymn in praise of military prowess, and how does that send Handel's music soaring into meaning for us now? "None but the Brave deserves the Fair". Sun, 15 March 2009, 20:49:38, UKPOETRY listserv.

Further teasing the Christian thread, I suspect that “man for thy sake”, found alongside “you stormy” in Poem 7, evokes this Tudor carol:

Man, be merry, I thee rede,
But beware what mirths thou make;
Christ is clothed in thy weed,
And he is made man for thy sake.

He came fro His Father’s seat,
Into this world to be thy make;
Man, beware how thou Him treat,
For He is made man for thy sake.

Look thou mercy every cry,
Now and alway, rathe and late;
And He will set thee wonder high,
For He is made man for thy sake.¹⁹

It may not be too much of a stretch to discern in Poem 7 the shadowy figure of Joseph of Arimathea who carried Christ “over to the burying ground” and hence to associate “you stormy” with Christ himself. A further stretch would be to recall that Joseph of Arimathea became the centre of a Grail cult associated with Tintagel in Cornwall, and that his reputed voyage from the Holy Land to Britain followed a Phoenician trade route. The shanty “o your stormy” long postdates this mythical pursuit but can aptly be reassigned for a sound-track to Arimathea’s short walk and extended voyage.

Poem 14 (“A new work a new song”) draws for the couplet “raised like a great shout I heard two lovers | talking and singing a fine song I will ramble” on another sea shanty, plainly itself recombining a repertoire of stock situations and phrases from the ballad tradition:

Two Lovers Discoursing

As I rode out one evening down by a river side,

¹⁹ Edith Rickert, *Ancient English Christmas Carols: 1400-1700*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1914, pp. 209-10.

I heard two lovers talking and the fair one she replied.
You're the most unconstant young man that ever I did know,
You promised for to marry me, why did you not do so?

“If I promised for to marry you, I was goin’ to break my vow
But believe me, dearest Mary, I could not come till now
If I had all the gold and silver that ever my eyes did see,
Oh, gladly would I spend it, love, in your sweet company.”

“Oh, begone, you false deceiver, you told me that before!
You went away the last time, never to return any more.
You went and you courted Nancy, that girl with the rolling eye,
She was your joy and fancy, how can you that deny?”

“Who told you these false stories, love, and told them to be true,
That I had been courting Nancy and quite forgotten you?
It was only to bring disturbances between you, love, and I
I hate such foolish arguments, for you I could live and die!”

“Begone, you false deceiver, you’re the flower of all disdain,
You came both late and early my favors for to gain;
But now I disregard you as all the world might see.
From you and all all men breathing, thank God, this day I’m free.”

“Do you see those little small birds that fly from tree to tree?
They’re kinder to each other, by far, than you’re to me.
But since you are for changing the old love for the new,
My days I’ll spend in rambling those woods and valleys through.”

It was the last words Mary spoke that pierced young Willies heart.
He fain would have gone and left her there, but from her he could
not part;
The day being warm and pleasant, down by a church they passed,
They joined their hands in wedlock bands, long looked for, but come
at last.²⁰

²⁰ W. Doerflinger, *Shantymen and shantyboys: songs of the sailor and lumberman*, New York: Macmillan, 1951.

The themes of deception, betrayal and ingratitude run *sotto voce* throughout *Word Order*, sometimes a mere “spoken hint”, sometimes “hardly a sound”, sometimes barely audible owing to severe hearing loss (this is the significance of “reverse slope” in Poem 9, where these hearing difficulties are encountered). Simon Perril has traced the echoes of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* in *Word Order*, providing him with compass points for a reading quite other than the gloss supplied here – a reminder that glossing is open season for poems.²¹

Lastly and no doubt irresistibly attracted by this lyric set of blows and hard blowing, the penultimate Poem 17 is infiltrated by Amiens’ celebrated song from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the Shakespeare song most frequently set to music and the *locus classicus* for “man’s ingratitude”. Since Amiens is by profession a singer, a member of Duke Senior’s entourage living exiled by ingratitude in the Forest of Arden, this song is exceptional for *Word Order* in not originating as a work song (assuming the carol counts as an instance of work in praise and prayer).²²

²¹ Shakespeare’s play, specifically Claudio’s speech in Act 3 Scene 1, becomes particularly visible in Poem 5:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison’d in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and uncertain thought
Imagine howling: ‘tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

Simon Perril argues that *Measure for Measure* provides an important context for Prynne’s worrying at the ‘natural’ throughout *Word Order*: see his thesis *Contemporary British poetry and modernist innovation* (PhD Diss, University of Cambridge, 1996), Ch. 5, ‘Response And Responsibility In J.H. Prynne’s *Word Order*’.

²² Bizarrely *The Oxford Book of Carols* (1984) includes the song in Thomas Arne’s setting as ‘Shakespeare’s Carol’. I suppose the mere mention of holly is enough.

BLOW, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude;
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.

Heigh ho! sing, heigh ho! unto the green holly:
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:
Then heigh ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.

Freeze, freeze, thou bitter sky,
That dost not bite so nigh
As benefits forgot:
Though thou the waters warp,
Thy sting is not so sharp
As friend remember'd not.

Heigh ho! sing, heigh ho! unto the green holly:
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly:
Then heigh ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.

While “Blow, blow’ may not be a work song, its repetitions and solo and refrain structure have more in common with ‘Rap Her to Bank’ than the narrative ballad-derived ‘Two Lovers Discoursing’ – indeed its refrain is strongly reminiscent of “Hey ho and up she rises” from the most famous of shanties, ‘What Shall We Do with the Drunken Sailor’, and its rhythm’s powerful stresses resonate with hauling activities and intake and expulsion of deep breaths. Also tied into the rhythms of physical work are Amiens’ “syllabic routines”, a phrase from *Field Notes* where Prynne contends of Wordsworth’s poetic response to “Yon solitary Highland Lass”:

[...] even at a distance he can intuit her body rhythms from his own physical and motor self-experience, the exertion of repeated work movements: the effect of rhythm in shaping and regulating the sequence of a muscular effort to make for balance and smoothness of transition and a certain

trance-like suspension of anything that would distract from persistence towards completion of the task. Within this intimate connection of voice sound and body movement it is not unusual for the popular oral tradition to include vocalisation that is sub-textual, not containing fully formed word elements, as in whistling or humming or keening. In repeated song structures like burdens or refrains there are frequently syllabic routines that by convention do not carry full lexical or syntactic sense: they are sound-words whose function is as carrier to rhythm and melody.”²³

This characterisation of “sound-words” applies not only to the refrain “Heigh ho” but at one level at least to “Blow, blow”. Complex in its structure, the song opens with a straightforward injunction or invitation – but delivered to what or whom? To the audience? Surely not only to the winter wind: for this “rude breath” also comprises the singer’s reflex response to “man’s ingratititude”. The solo passages consist of tuned gasps and groans while the choruses amount to a willed exhalation. The phrase “Blow, blow” invites the wind’s buffets and says to hell with them; enjoins a response from an accompanist, a companion; sings out through the coincidence of external blows and blowing from within; and also opens the song with a sound that becomes at once a reflex groan, a sigh of resignation and a cry of exhilarated resistance, a sound dominating the entire song. “Heigh ho” then sings out as a brave and reckless response to torment.

Remarkable too in this song is the attribution to wind and sky, large-scale and circumambient phenomena, of the horribly present and exceedingly sharp weaponry of tooth, bite and sting. And what of holly? Holly as the boldest evergreen must stand for survival in the face of the unkind elements, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “a holyn bobbe, | Pat is grattest in grene when greuez ar bare” (holly | That shows greenest when all the groves are leafless).²⁴ And even though spiny, holly conjures up the promise of Christmas and jollity. To anticipate, the next and final poem in *Word Order* with its “metal

²³ *Field Notes* pp.12-13.

²⁴ Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993.

<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/textidx?c=cme;cc=cme;rgn=main;view=ext;idno=Gawain>, pp.6-7

spike” and spine might be read as a grimly parodic version of Shakespeare’s song, despite the economy of the single “ah” in place of refrain. Still, “ah” could be held to belong to a semantic refrain, since by this point the reader has learnt to watch his breath, from the “ethereal vapour” of the first poem to the “whispered turbulence” of the third, to the airways, the filled lungs and the sigh of the fifth, the gasps of the ninth, the wind raised in the fourteenth, the held breath and peak flow (again) of the fifteenth, the breathing of the sixteenth and the rush of wind of the penultimate poem. And there have been several blows already before the last poem begins “A blow on the side of the mouth” in another echo of ‘Blow, blow’. Through all these blows it is important, it is even critical to hold to the note of celebration of survival in Shakespeare’s song.

The significance in Poem 15 of “peak flow” is that a peak flow meter asks a patient for a single but strenuous “ah”, a sharp and complete evacuation of the lungs. Peak flow is self-administered (although often under instruction). The apparently medical scene of the final poem, as likely to be conducted in an interrogation suite or by way of *in vivo* experimentation as to comprise a therapeutic ‘intervention’, presents a much more problematic knot of agency:

[...] for there is
no cry, hardly as to know
is to loosen, being not part of sense
or by auscultation, taking the air
and the force crushes up, blow upon
the windpipe, next as a rush for breath
for in the spine direct from the eyes
holding back the parts
of the soul by black thuds
you know you do

This passage exhibits Prynne’s characteristic middle-period use of strong causal connectives (“for”, “as”, “being” in the sense of ‘since it is’, “next”) and authoritative rhythm and line-breaks, here cleaving to the diction and rhythms of a seventeenth-century English Puritan sermon, but allied disconcertingly to syntactical non-attributability. Such a combination imparts a peculiar force to the phrasal unit and pressure on each word’s historical range of usage. Thus for instance the word “parts”, especially in its second appearance, evokes the

Renaissance sense surviving in the phrase ‘a man of parts’, signifying qualities or attributes. A more complex example is represented by the phrase “taking the air”. This draws sardonically on a phrase signifying the most genteel form of exercise, and at the same time evokes the commonplace medical phrase ‘taking the temperature’ (owing to its proximity to “auscultation”). It further proposes that air might in this context be ‘taken’ as a hard drug is taken, while through the violence of the cæsura the word ‘take’ is invested with the force of ‘wrest’. Such a penumbra of signification may be characteristic of late modernist poetry, but Prynne’s usage is remarkable in that there is nothing wobbly or vaguely symbolist about it. Prosodically, the procedures stay as sharp-edged as the most determinedly didactic of discourses, and the tone is unvitiated by self-conscious contrivance – so “crushes” passes as an emphatic form of ‘rushes’ rather than a considered device. To pause and consider would fall foul of the dictum “to know | is to loosen”, whereas the cry is “part of sense”. This because the cry is *emergent*, to return to Heideggerian terminology, by contrast with the cerebrospinal system functioning “direct from the eyes” and which is the basis for considered agency: “you know you do”. The cry will be defeated at once, after but a comma’s lapse, by “ah, attention” – an attention which is technologically mediated as “auscultation” is mediated by a stethoscope, or as a metal spike’s tooth or sting sets the blow at nothing. The technological mediation concluding this poem cycles back to the first line of what now discloses itself as a poem-cycle, “on the paper hoop as a form | goes on through.”

But this return is not to be regarded as a defeat, since in the course of the cycle the reader has come to recognise ‘form’ as a hinge word. When “we inserted our names” at the beginning of this cycle, we may have thought, given the rapidity of the ensuing violence, that this ‘we’ was being checked into a concentration camp or ‘high security facility’, particulars taken. But the pronoun ‘we’ also enjoins a readerly identification – as readers we tend unconsciously to insert our names into the forms of the texts we read, entering a compact. That such a reflection is no idle fancy so far as *Word Order* goes is made more plausible through Poem 3:

We were bribed and bridled
with all we had, in
the forms of marriage

This may be a highly ambivalent reference, but Prynne never indulges the reader with a secure position; and “the forms of marriage” here associated with bribery and punningly with “bridled”, return in Poem 14 which begins on a strikingly affirmative note, “A new work a new song it is compliance | will raise the wind as with one voice”, before fetching up on “a sound reef | brimming a collapsed lung in matching parts.” Even this breath-driven shipwreck (apt terminus to the shanty ‘Two Lovers Discoursing’ on which the poem draws) does not invalidate the forms permitting “matching parts” – forms which are of *word order*, grammatical, prosodic and versed. Furthermore, to cite marriage in particular as a form is to cite a performative, and hence by implication to make an important claim about the nature of poetic language. This claim joins with and strengthens the claim implicit in the centrality of work song, in that the performative is relocated from a purely grammatical category into a physical consonance: body, cry and world. Evidently the performative cannot be expected to remain stable, as the deceitful mutters underneath so many of the poems in *Word Order* continually serve notice (“they are underneath”). Nonetheless and despite the vicissitudes of individual deceit and forgetfulness, of violence individual and collective, and of the mere forms which can docket an individual or a collective to doom – nonetheless and despite this, “a form | goes on through”, and the consonant form in lyric poetry of body, cry and world is the fullest demonstration of this truth. “Blow, blow.”

But how far is it true that “a form | goes on through”? The drinking song, the work song, the shanty, the carol; these songs are argued by some to precede music’s separation from life’s dailiness, aspiring to that categorical sublimity associated with Kant – the separation between the sublime and the efficient, a world which can hold art and what needs to be done administratively entirely separate. Hannah Arendt’s account of totalitarianism surely comes to mind. And it appears from both the considered discourse of *Field Notes* and the poetic consonance of *Word Order* that Prynne broadly accepts the notion of an unalienated art. Word order and all other orders derive from a single order rooted in human activity grounded in the world. Lurking here is the romance of the primitive, associated for example with the painting and life of Paul Gauguin in Tahiti, a romance that

posits the original absence of any separation of art from life's work including religious ceremony and sexual and sumptuary customs. Yet

the oft-repeated statement that Pacific Islanders and other indigenous peoples have (or had) no word for "art" is true only in the narrowest sense. Although the Western conception of art as an activity undertaken solely, or primarily, for aesthetic enjoyment did not exist in the vast majority of Oceanic cultures, virtually all Pacific peoples have highly developed and clearly articulated aesthetic standards by which they evaluate the creations of their ancestors and contemporaries. [...] To say that a work is "beautiful" or "correct" is often based as much on its being made in its proper form, by the appropriate person or persons, observing the necessary ceremonial protocols, and its being used in the correct manner as on its physical appearance.²⁵

Presumably these cautions and discriminations should apply also to European folk art traditions, that is prior to the categorical identification of 'folk art'. 'Proper form' is required for vessels and sounds to resonate. How can such forms carry into complex late modernist verse such as Prynne's; how is this relationship to be conceived? There's a considerable distance from a cry to a sea shanty, and a considerable distance further from a sea shanty to *Word Order*. So the groundedness of this poet's song might be thought inflationary, a derivative. After all, such writing is disconnected historically and culturally from the work songs on which it calls in part for authority; there is no common constituency.

Such disconnection may be neither fortuitous nor unfortunate. The publication in 2005 of Emmanuel Faye's *Heidegger, l'introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie* and of its English translation in 2009 reminds yet again of the dangers in the imaginary relationship of 'proper form' with unalienated work and native place; from here it is not so far to the *völkisch*. Therefore it is important to register that right from the

²⁵ Eric Kjellgren, *Oceania: Art of the Pacific Islands in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p.6.

start, for example in the central early poem ‘Aristeas, in Seven Years’ (1968),²⁶ the prime relationship of individuals and peoples to the world in Prynne’s poetry is migratory, and most specifically is associated with pastoral transhumance; fourteen years after *The White Stones* (1969) *The Oval Window* (1983) remains preoccupied with the movements of transhumance which, by no means incidentally, are not only lateral and circuitous but also rising and falling. Sea shanties are the perfect form to avoid the whole spectrum from parochial to *völkisch*, bringing together the critical exchange mechanism of oceanic trade routes, the rising and falling of wave and breath and the hauling of ropes and their collective performance and consonance, while dislodging the forms of ballad from places of origin into a currency among peoples. Ballads *carry* between distant shores, and shanties are the sounds and sinews of their transmission. These are the *measures* by which we go, measure for measure. And by which Duke Senior’s court rides in its exile.

Even so, might it be thought that to root claims for lyric poetry in strenuous labour and even in torture at the last extremity, is ethically insupportable? To address this in *ad hominem* fashion, how could a Cambridge academic presume to trade on such extremity? To answer the charge, it is necessary to cite these guidelines:

- 4 Keeping the airway open, look, listen, and feel for normal breathing.
 - Look for chest movement.
 - Listen at the victim’s mouth for breath sounds.
 - Feel for air on your cheek.

In the first few minutes after cardiac arrest, a victim may be barely breathing, or taking infrequent, noisy, gasps. Do not confuse this with normal breathing.

Look, listen, and feel for no more than 10 sec to determine if the victim is breathing normally. If you have any doubt whether breathing is normal, act as if it is not normal.

[...]

²⁶ ‘Aristeas, in Seven Years’ in J.H. Prynne, *Aristeas*. London: Ferry Press 1968, pp.7-13 (including notes).

5B If he is not breathing normally:

- Ask someone to call for an ambulance or, if you are on your own, do this yourself; you may need to leave the victim. Start chest compression as follows:
- Kneel by the side of the victim.
- Place the heel of one hand in the centre of the victim's chest.
- Place the heel of your other hand on top of the first hand.
- Interlock the fingers of your hands and ensure that pressure is not applied over the victim's ribs. Do not apply any pressure over the upper abdomen or the bottom end of the bony sternum (breastbone).
- Position yourself vertically above the victim's chest and, with your arms straight, press down on the sternum 4 - 5 cm.
- After each compression, release all the pressure on the chest without losing contact between your hands and the sternum. Repeat at a rate of about 100 times a minute (a little less than 2 compressions a second).
- Compression and release should take an equal amount of time.

6A Combine chest compression with rescue breaths.

- After 30 compressions open the airway again using head tilt and chin lift.
- Pinch the soft part of the victim's nose closed, using the index finger and thumb of your hand on his forehead.
- Allow his mouth to open, but maintain chin lift.
- Take a normal breath and place your lips around his mouth, making sure that you have a good seal.
- Blow steadily into his mouth whilst watching for his chest to rise; take about one second to make his chest rise as in normal breathing; this is an effective rescue breath.
- Maintaining head tilt and chin lift, take your mouth away from the victim and watch for his chest to fall as air comes out.
- Take another normal breath and blow into the victim's mouth once more to give a total of two effective rescue breaths. Then return your hands without delay to the correct position on the sternum and give a further 30 chest compressions.

- Continue with chest compressions and rescue breaths in a ratio of 30:2.
- Stop to recheck the victim only if he starts breathing normally; otherwise do not interrupt resuscitation.²⁷

The blows and pains *Word Order* remembers may actually have been delivered to and through the poet's own body, his own sounding vessel, by way of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) – a procedure that follows the sequence described above of auscultation (listening), chest compression (blows to the chest) and resuscitation (blows into the mouth). Whether or not the poet himself experienced or administered CPR, and here the metal spike strongly suggests CPR following a road traffic accident, CPR tellingly relocates those core physical functions conventionally conceived as individual and internal, into an exchange acknowledging their shaping by a person's social and physical environment. Breathing is a gaseous exchange modified constantly by air's constituents and by air pressure, and modified too by the body's strength, freedom and extent of damage (including age). Poem 5 refers to "airways blown | round about"; for resuscitation, a patient's airways must be cleared of any obstruction, but here "blown" can suggest a blown circuit while "round about" can refer to the vital sign of 'air on your cheek' (see above, and glossed in Poem 5 as "a sigh | lilting through the air") and also to the wind raised in Poem 14 – perhaps too to the transmission of ballad and shanty by analogy with 'folkways', the patterns of conventional behaviour in a society. By the time a reader has reached the final poem, the axis of crush and rush has to be received in terms of chest compression as described in the CPR procedure, and the first poem re-thought to place "struck to put | words into the mouth" within that economy. Apropos, in circulating complimentary copies of his pamphlets, J.H. Prynne takes care with compliments slips; the slip for *Word Order* bears the legend "Medical Gas Data & Safety Sheet | Substance Identification | Air | With the Author's Compliments".

Therefore I would suggest that sea shanties and CPR determine the cognitive substrate of *Word Order* and that they underpin the following claims: Human breathing is inherently a collective and

²⁷ Excerpt from *Adult Basic Life Support* issued by Resuscitation Council (UK), on-line at www.resus.org.uk/pages/bls.pdf.

environmentally-shaped activity; human freedom is shaped out of work and particularly out of the work of movement across land and ocean; lyric poetry is the highest form of such freedom becomes it encodes such movement in the sounds forced by physical necessity (breathing and work) and out of the cry, sigh and gasp can produce the most strenuous thinking while maintaining fidelity to the collectivity, to marriage across time and space. However far lyric poetry strays “it is compliance”; but if the bond to body and work is broken, lyric poetry relinquishes its special performativity and reduces to a form of words. In such a case the declaration “the paper hoop as a form | goes on through”²⁸ resonates ominously. First it might evoke the continuous stationary used for outputting completed forms on a dot matrix printer, hence summoning up another kind of performative, neither marital nor lyric – the filling in of name and personal details demanded bureaucratically to receive a range of ‘entitlements’. This is a bleak vision of the administered life. More extreme is what recollection of the opening to this cycle might now further propose – to be named and docketed for extermination.

Revisiting the opening of the cycle it is difficult to withstand the resonance of the Dachaulied, the work song of forced labourers, the condemned; difficult too to forget the prevalence of ‘singing on command’ in concentration camps, both as a form of discipline comparable with military marching songs and the chain gang songs of the American penal system, and as one of many forms of arbitrary terror for the amusement of SS guards. Nonetheless and as the example of the chain gang demonstrates, singing on command, particularly in the collective work song, becomes a survival strategy at the same time as inculcating a submission to discipline. As Guido Fackler writes in his important account “Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945”: “The fact that music was performed in the camps forces us to realize that the prisoners should not be regarded as an undifferentiated ‘grey mass.’ [...] It would be wrong to underestimate the effect of playing music independently as a method of coping practically and surviving culturally. The values and aesthetics inherent in music were a defense against the terror of the

²⁸ *Word Order*, final poem, last two lines.

camps.”²⁹ Therefore the final poem in *Word Order*, for all its violence, should not be understood as inviting despair, any more than Amiens’ song. Song at the extremity of individual or collective life enforces the acknowledgement that “it is important | to be lyrical and joyous”, whether these words are broadcast from the mouth of an SS guard or formulated in the prisoners’ dormitory.

As it happens, the insistence that *Word Order* does not lead to paralysis by fear or to unmitigated pessimism is supported by a letter from Prynne to Douglas Oliver shortly after the poem’s first publication:

But, biting my own hand, I need to add in passing that *Word Order* is by no means a case of pessimism: if anything, quite the reverse. In not all circumstances is the measure of fear, laid across an occluded history, an index of potential truth; for one thing, there is the weakness of impatience and hindsight. But pessimism is a vulgar error because it assumes doctrine and conceptualises fear into a noetic defence: I would regard that as an evident mark of failure. It has to be as infantile and lazy as its opposite, since either by itself merely vapourises the other. I’m reminded here of Brecht’s allegation that Kafka’s unlimited pessimism was allied to an incorrigible naivety (the latter, indeed, surely rescues the former, and who was BB to make such a charge). Or, better to recall Adorno’s comment: ‘He over whom Kafka’s wheels have passed has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.’ Yet that too is mistaken in demanding indelible permanence of the negative, like so many common-place misreadings of Beckett, as if the effect of desperation cannot strongly alter a life without causing a total subjugation to its strength. I studied a full set of Goya’s *Desastres* while at Tübingen, and

²⁹ Guido Fackler, ‘Music in Concentration Camps 1933–1945’, tr. Peter Logan, *Music & Politics* 1.1 (2007), <http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2007-1/fackler.html>

the ignominy of survival was never more distant in my thoughts.³⁰

Perhaps this insistence governs the epigraph to *Word Order*, “Strew sugar over the zephyrs”, presumably taken from a cookery book since ‘gâteau zephyr’ is a kind of airy and uncooked cheesecake strewn with powdered sugar prior to serving. Such a peculiarly fey association, along with the poetic connotation of zephyr as mild and gentle, may be designed at once to lead the reader by the nose and to reassure that this poem may be at once as serious as your life and a confection, a pastime, a higher form of shooting the breeze. It may also recall (quite obliquely) line 5 of Chaucer’s Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*: “Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breath,” not to mention Petrarch’s sonnet ‘Zefiro Torna’, For all that more dignified paternity, it feels like the only self-conscious club in, on or around *Word Order*.

.....

In concluding this partial gloss, for no gloss can be anything be partial (in both senses) and there is much evidence a gloss on Prynne is liable to be more partial than most, it seems right to reflect on the claims made explicitly in *Field Notes* and poetically in *Word Order* for lyric poetry. What do such claims entail in the way of reading? How much or how little is the attentive reader expected to register, and at what level of consciousness whether mental or in some other sense physical? The indications in *Field Notes* are contradictory, and may betray some unease regarding their tenability; or at least imply some concession either regarding the limited circumstances in which they may be tenable, or accepting that different kinds of impact may be anticipated according to the cultural formation of the reader.

Writing about “The Solitary Reaper” in *Field Notes*, Prynne discusses Wordsworth’s reception of the reaper’s song in terms reminiscent of the instructions for close listening he enjoined on the audience at the first Pearl River Poetry Conference in Guangzhou in 2005 before

³⁰ Prynne to Douglas Oliver, 5th February 1990. Douglas Oliver Archive Box 9, Albert Sloman library, University of Essex. My thanks to Matt ffytche for providing this citation.

reading from “Blue Slides At Rest”: to close their eyes, to extinguish their thoughts, to receive each word as a tiny and quickly-extinguished light. It was difficult not to imagine the result as a star-map, a starry envelope in which each audience member would be alone but through a dawning recognition of the constellations might find it possible to navigate, whether to a home port or an unfamiliar shore. In Guangzhou Prynne was training the attention of an audience without English language memory, and most specifically, an audience uninducted into the rhythms of English song and verse. The starry envelope so guiding his audience for whom English sounds were unfamiliar and as it were abstract, figures more elaborately in *Field Notes* as a complex and sonically-generated “perceptual envelope” marked, as in the case of Pacific islanders, by “aesthetic parameters of its own” while dependent on *resonance* with work activities. At the end of his wonderfully rich description, Prynne cites the sea shanty as his prime example of the unified lifting and rising of sound and body.

But if, for motives out of the usual run, the encounter is to carry a strong significance and to be the object of strongly focussed attention, and if the specifically musical-structural features of her singing are also unfamiliar to him and beyond his diagnostic skills, he must receive the simple inflow of mood-altering features fully into his receptive interior consciousness, and trace out in the run of his own feelings the pattern and sequence of mood-signals and other cues within his own experience and memory. This is what close listening has to mean.

[...]

In a normal attentional environment the rhythms of the ambient temporal markers do not align with musical experience, which requires the listener to enter into a discrete perceptual envelope with aesthetic parameters of its own; but here the musical sound is tuned into resonance with work as itself a resonance-patterned response to environmental conditions, a near-total ecology; so that there is a transmission channel for a ‘primal sound’ (*Ur-Geräusch*) experience to induce matching resonance responses in the subject-awareness of the listener.

[...] the melodic *tactus* will part-match the repeating effort cycle, and the lifting (body) and rising (voice) will each occupy the same real-time serial duration. Sea shanties are like this.³¹

While this discussion begins by describing the response of one of England's greatest poets to the singing of a reaper, the "he" of the first paragraph rapidly shifts to refer to the generic reader before concluding "this is what close listening has to mean." In this first paragraph, what it means seems entirely reconcilable with the Guangzhou instructions since the song is presumed to lie "beyond his diagnostic skills" and close listening connects the singer's "mood signals" with an individual repertoire drawn from memory and resonating with the song. So it is that song in a strange language may nonetheless carry deep affective potency. However, it is the coincidence of the resonance-patterning of work and music which is required for the perceptual envelope to reach the condition of a "near-total ecology"; and this surely amounts to a much stronger claim for the agency of lyric poetry in the lives of those who may not understand the meaning of what they hear, or by extension, read. For this to be true for the listener it does require a "receptive inner consciousness", such as the Guangzhou instructions were designed to prepare. But maybe the claim goes so far as to envelope those who have not ears to hear, inhabiting an ecology as unknowingly as any other creature. The "closed circle" then does not need to involve benumbed behaviour, but is more akin to Prospero's circle. Where Prynne writes of 'primal sound', by the way (but is anything 'by the way'?), he refers to Rilke's musing in the brief essay "Ur-Geräusch" (1919) on an imagined extension of the gramophone needle's facility to make sound out of the sutures of the skull or any other contour or wave, terrestrial or oceanic:

A sound would necessarily result, a series of sounds, music
... feelings – which? incredulity, timidity, fear, awe – which
among all the feelings possible, prevent me from suggesting
a name for the primal sound which would then make its
appearance in the world ... leaving that aside for the
moment: What variety of grooves then, occurring

³¹ *Field Notes* p16.

anywhere, could one not put under the needle and try out? Is there any contour that one could not, in a sense, complete in this way and then experience it, as it makes itself felt, thus transformed, in another field of sense?³²

Thus a totalising synaesthesia is conjured by lyric as a special case of work song, running freely through airways and along shipping routes, and even along the files of prisoners on work detail at Dachau, generating this ‘primal sound’.

The poet of lyric as recondite as Prynne’s lyric can be, therefore might put faith in resonance recognised even if unidentified. This might ensure that Schelling’s “closed circle of poetry” is perfused with the voices of people at work. The air is full of intensities, zoned by song as the land is zoned by labour; and just as people keep to the path without inquiring how it was laid, so their voices and their hearing follow unexamined contours, rising and falling in response to immediate but historically-shaped surroundings. But such an almost-mystical faith cannot satisfy the particular duties levied on “the thoughtful reader” to use Prynne’s term. In *Field Notes* Prynne sets the bar very high for him or her, not by implication only but by reflection on how “the thoughtful reader” should engage with a text. The problems faced by “the thoughtful reader” of *Word Order* begin with the relationship between this poem and the songs it evokes. At what level is this relationship to be apprehended? How are reading and research related? Consider the following passage and what it implies:

The thoughtful reader must thus reach decision upon two points: first, whether the choice intimated here can be recognised as tacitly admitted even if by the now-familiar pattern of absence, that these are not accidental or culpable oversights but an impassioned refusal to be bound by what too easily binds even the imagination into subjected and abjected states (“involuntary servitude”); and second, whether the reader can without complicit self-deception share even insecure pleasure at a freedom lifted out of contests which are not admitted and not denied but which

³² An adapted Google translation.

are acknowledged by omission, as in the nature of things as they are. Can the imperative of imagination legitimately perform this much, without displaying the full workings of the struggle, both in the task of reckoning a moral station for observation from outside, and also in the duty to reckon truthfully the struggle of values within the scene itself, as bearing upon the human figure and the apparent captivity of the individual within the figure of the type?³³

When *Word Order* evokes a song, it might make a difference whether this is programmatic, fortuitous or unconscious. Given that Prynne's situating of "The Solitary Reaper" exploits an erudition beyond the facility of all but a few readers, to identify exactly what Wordsworth omits to recognise in achieving a resonance compacting a full ecology, it may be inferred that "the thoughtful reader" is expected to operate at a similar pitch – and furthermore, having done so to challenge at all points the self-deceptions liable to infect his or her reading. Having "inserted our names" it is up to us to "get to grips with | the closed circle" that our readings tend towards. Therefore the synaesthetic reading and the thoughtful reading agree in avoiding the closed circle of interpretation, whether through the openness that permits a resonant inhabiting of the world, unhomed in *das sein*, or through the open, restless, unending activity of the gloss.

But wait. The flier issued by Prest Roots Press for the first publication of *Word Order* bears a monitory sentence that recalls Schelling: "If we are to be offered a citation, it is one already in another order, and so not to be sampled without falling upon what it is the words' own evidences await at order." Maybe *Word Order* is a closed circle in a limiting sense, a verbal counterfactual after all? All this glossing, mere avoidance behaviour?

³³ *Field Notes*, p.62.

