

## THOUGHT AND/OR MAGIC IN *THE WHITE STONES*

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While many American poets spanning the time period from the original publication of *The White Stones* (U.K. publication date: 1968) up to the present have been busy rebelling against meaning, against conventions of identity, and against conventions of form, English poet J.H. Prynne has largely been rebelling against the same things. Then what's the significance of this volume, presented to us at such a late date, if we're already reading much of the same kind of poetry? To simply promote a foreign author Americans don't read?

But many Americans have already noticed Prynne, and they haven't turned a deaf ear to his work. Prynne maintained correspondences with both Charles Olson and Ed Dorn, and many of those called experimental poets during the 1970s and '80s found who they thought to be a likeminded writer in Prynne. Nevertheless, like much of that experimental writing, Prynne's poetry is often valued for what it is thought to be over what it offers up on its own. As a result, he's been treated almost as a proto-Conceptualist, his writing almost like Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day*: acknowledge the point of the text, but reading it is secondary. Possibly because of this, in addition to his foreign context, his actual writing hasn't received much attention here.

Another reason for the lack of attention is that his poetry, what one poet and novelist described to me as "English density," is hard to understand — it resists conventions of meaning and reading, although using different strategies than what many American poets are using. Even for a fan of Prynne like myself, I often end up turning on the soft focus and glossing over passages as I read him, knowing full-well that by doing so I'm missing the poems' semantic value, the full meaning as embodied in the work.

But maybe it's for this kind of obstructed reading that Prynne has near-mythical status amongst many of his fans, his lack of presence in American letters creating talismans of his hard-to-find books. Like a holdout modernist who refuses to compromise on the ontological status of his writing, doing it on his own terms stylistically and materially — aside from *The White Stones*, Prynne has almost exclusively published in chapbook format (and, obviously, aside from editions of his collected poetry).

He continues the internationalist project of modernism by spending time in mainland China, and has even written in Classical Chinese. Translations of his Chinese work being unpublished, it's as if he's saying: if you want to understand my work, you need to go the full distance. He may have written commentaries on Shakespeare and Wordsworth, but to many their linguistic density will make it feel as if they're trying to read Chinese.

In addition, while many poets in the US were continuing to push vernacular English, or at least what appeared in verse to be vernacular English, Prynne was also writing what can be read as loosely resembling vernacular English. It was a far cry, however, from English populist ("political") poetry or even the much-imitated New York-school style of Frank O'Hara and, later, Eileen Myles. Even though Prynne's writing mimics the patterns of speech, who would actually talk like *that*? His "speech" sounds closer to Stéphane Mallarmé than it does Walt Whitman.

Then the mind fills with snow the  
free, open syllables of reward. All the

limbs respond, to this my eyes see, there  
the sense of an immense patch — the north  
atlantic wake.

(from "A Sonnet to Famous Hopes," p.80)

It's probably for this reason that Prynne has often been spoken of as a formalist, and sometimes read like a conceptualist. As if he is privileging the fact of the poem over what is being communicated, the poems may come across to some as exercises in style, or assertions similar to the poetry of the "Language" poets, whose works are also often discussed less for what they are than for what they do (and "what they do," over and over, is by design demonstrate the constructed-ness of discourse). But it would be too easy to read Prynne is such a way. In addition to his numerous essays and commentaries, his poetry doesn't seem to be lacking analytic or critical intent.

For example, the opening poem of *The White Stones* doesn't yield the easiest reading experience, but nevertheless holds together in its development of a theme. And although that theme happens to be one of the most popular of tropes ("love" and "the heart"), it is undercut by what the poem actually says, where love is not only "an easy hopeless departure," but also "the first social fluency." In such a manner, the poem is not formalist at all. If anything, the formalist/not-formalist dichotomy seems a cheap way to describe what happens in his poetry. Perhaps a better way to describe it would be to say that it gives the impression of recording thought in something like realtime, where the lines and propositions speak to the subject matter *as if* through the mouth of the speaking subject.

However, those thoughts aren't designed to communicate in a way which confirms already established norms of communication. The poem communicates without persuasion, but in taking positions. Although ostensibly about love, we find little in terms of romantic dedications. Instead, the poem is heavy with assertions about what is the case — about what is needed to "survive."

The century roar is a desert carrying  
too much away; the plane skids off  
with an easy hopeless departure.  
    The music, that it should  
    leave, is far down  
    in the mind  
just as if the years were part of the  
same sound, prolonged into the latent  
    action of the heart.  
    That is more: there  
    affection will shoot it up  
    like a crazed pilot. The desert  
is a social and undedicated expanse, since  
what else there is counts as merest propaganda.  
    The heart is a changed  
    petromorph, making  
    pressure a social  
intelligence: essential news  
or present fact  
over the whole distance back

and further, away.

Or could be thus, as water  
is the first social fluency  
in any desert: the cistern

comes later and is an inducement of false power.

Which makes the thinning sorrow of flight

the last disjunction, of the heart: that

news is the person, and love

the shape of his compulsion

in the musical phrase,

nearly but not

yet back, into

the remotest

past.

Of which the heart is capable and will journey

over any desert and through the air, making

the turn and stop undreamed of:

love is, always, the

flight back

to where

we are.

("Airport Poem: Ethics of Survival," pp.5-6)

Again, in the poem "Bronze: Fish," we read the poet discuss an urban scene, and what is needed in order to maintain its "cohesion." At the end of the meditation he seems to offer a choice of whether or not to turn away from its "mercantile harvest," and confirms the choice to begin the project anew, at the most basic level of the calendar. This is the poetry of positions and, whether erotic or sentimental, they are intellectually focused on analysis.

So while Prynne is speaking through a language medium, it is the language medium which conveys his thought as a survey and analysis. The voice of the poem appears to be the thinking subject, with line breaks accommodating disruptions of thought and not serving as either decoration or arbitrary typographic margins. Even in the case of thought simply pushing past a typographic margin, the margin is demonstrative of the genre poetry, and calls to mind its long history as a medium for thinking. Works by Lucretius and William Blake come to mind.

We are at the edge of all that and  
can reach back to another  
matter, only it's not back but  
down rather, or in some involved  
sense of further off. The virtues  
of prudence, the rich arable soil:  
but why should ever the whole  
mercantile harvest run to form  
again? The social cohesion  
of towns is our newer ligature,  
and the binding, you must see, is  
the rule for connection, where we  
are licensed to expect. That's  
the human city, & we are  
now at the edge of it. Which way

are we facing. Burn the great sphere:  
count them, days of the week.

("Bronze: Fish," p.27)

And in case anyone doesn't take Prynne's exploration of social theory seriously, *The White Stones* also includes an essay by him, "A Note on Metal" (also 1968, though not part of the original publication of *The White Stones*). It explores the constructed-ness of trade, sacred fetishes, and metallurgy — in other words the constructed-ness of discourse, though as a topic and not a demonstration.

This edition of *The White Stones* can then also be seen as a complete meditation of sorts on select themes in different genres: verse, prose poetry, and the essay. In it we see Prynne take themes and think about them while calling our attention to the modalities of his discourse, or form. Even when he gives us "straight" prose, it comes off as pinched, highly dense language closer to the way thought happens than to the exposition style of an academic paper or magazine article. Again, more Mallarmé than Whitman.

And this is another source of the notion of the talismanic or fetish status of Prynne's work for many American poets. Although it probably was not written in such a manner, it becomes something seemingly sublime in its effects, with nods to themes and devices appearing like technologies of the sacred. The thought that gets done on the part of the reader seems to become an incarnation of the dark magic that is happening in the composition of the poems, which call to an antique past through form at the same time that they seek to transform the physical shape of the present with poems and chapbooks.

This is the near-opposite of a poem that confirms the existence of a topic through a given form (i.e.: contemporary love in a sonnet instead of in an airplane's "century roar"). In Prynne's work the already-existing is thought through, similar to the way Jackson Mac Low wrote through Ezra Pound. The poem and the reader alike grapple with the ontology of the subject matter, which is the poem.

For a long time the magical implications of transfer in any shape must have given a muted and perhaps not initially debased sacrality to objects of currency-status, just as fish-hooks and bullets became strongly magical objects in the societies formed around their use.

(from "A Note on Metal," p.127)

If *The White Stones* is then asking the reader to think through the difficulties of the poems' collective saying, then implicit in this is a new idea of what these poems, written almost half a century ago, have to say about experimental or progressive poetry today. Although the language of the poems at least sounds colloquial, the effects are far from that, lying closer to the language of philosophy or the social sciences. The role of speech in such a case is that it puts across a point, but not that it creates a counterfeit human voice. The way we speak is already coded enough, and Prynne takes license with this coding in order to record thought as a form or genre, rather than attempting to approximate what conventions of voice sound like in a poem.

If poetry is a record of thought, however, what to do with the soft focus reading of his work that's so hard to avoid? It's tempting to say re-read it until you understand it, just like with another soft focus book, *The Critique of Judgement*. But the soft focus moment reveals Prynne's work to not

be philosophy or sociology: there is no question that must be answered, and at no point does it actually lay claim to the status of inquiry.

Instead, it's again meditation in the truest sense: ideas run through a physical form. What that fosters may be a book, a fetish of sorts, or another kind of magic wherein the reader — American in this case — sees the grounds of possibility yield different results than thought possible before. Part of that is, of course, what happens with much literature, but another part does seem alchemical. By retraining the way we read, the New York Review of Books has put out not another book, but another writing of contemporary letters in English.