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BREAKING UP THE LANGUAGE: THE STRUGGLE WITH(IN) MODERNITY IN J. H. PRYNNE'S *BITING THE AIR*

Abstract

The essays focuses on J. H. Prynne's *Biting the Air*. Taking as a departure point Adorno's idea of the role of art in society, it is argued here that Prynne's sequence of poems thematises a conflict between the supremacy of the science- and market-oriented narratives of suppression of society and the attempts to subvert that narrative through a reinvention of the signifying process of language. Prynne resorts to radical parataxis in order to undermine the ostensibly natural hegemony of accepted idioms of science and market economy, offering a dense network of meanings that cannot be reduced to a flat formula.

“Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world”.
Theodor W. Adorno, “Reconciliation under Duress”

“We heard them and it was not in this word order”.
J. H. Prynne, *Word Order*

Neil Corcoran foresaw that J. H. Prynne's poetry after *Brass* (1971) might run the risk of becoming so hermetic as to be virtually incomprehensible to all but the clique of “devoted explicators” (Corcoran 177). Boldly dismissive though he might sound, Corcoran does strike a point, since the first impression on reading Prynne is that his work adamantly and obdurately refuses to respond to any of the customary interpretive strategies and the woebegone reader is eventually impelled to profess ignorance of what the poems actually try to say. Paradoxically, this multifaceted lack of acquiescence in the traditional modes of reading constitutes a large part of the evocative power of these poems; they can hardly be approached with the methods of commentary that

focus, for instance, on the propositional content of particular images which, in a greater or lesser measure, eventually reveal a number of sustained messages. Instead, Prynne compels his readers to shed what they have come to regard as “their language” in favour of an entirely new reading experience and it is this experience that falls within the immediate ambit of this essay. I seek to explore Prynne’s search for the emancipation of language in his recent volume *Biting the Air* (2003) against the backdrop of Theodor Adorno’s discussion of the role of art in modernity. Only when this strategy of re-appreciation of idiom has been delineated will Prynne’s passionate involvement with and criticism of contemporaneity become transparent.

The early Prynne affiliates himself with hermeneutical/phenomenological investigations that share much of their intellectual impetus with Martin Heidegger’s search for Being. As Anthony Mellors argues, underlining the poet’s affinity with the writings of Charles Olson, Prynne’s “path to the Real is *through* the space of the figural. That is, the interest in what is thought to be fundamental or basic is not marked by a pathological refusal of metaphor but [...] proceeds along a Heideggerian track that carries interpretational impasse towards a form of *Dasein*” (Mellors, *Literal Myth...* 43). This brings Mellors to the postulate that Prynne seeks to approach reality through language. Even in the earliest books like *Kitchen Poems* (1968) and *The White Stones* (1969) the poet understands that even if the real lies beneath the film of words, we have access to it solely through the idiom. It is in *The White Stones* in particular that Prynne formulates what may be considered to have become his principal technique in the volumes of the last twenty years; words carry in themselves a twofold potential, the literal and “earthly,” to refer it to Heidegger’s term from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” and the figurative which, similarly to Heideggerian “world,” opens up the path to the perception of the true reality of Being. Mellors notes that “in order to escape the empirical naivety of the false literal,¹ the inheritance of (pejorative) meaning must be lifted up to a figural plane, there to be ‘concretized’ and made truly real again” (Mellors, *Literal Myth...* 45). The transition from the literal to the figural marks the passage to a mythical plane wherein the truth of Being may be apprehended and then brought back to the sphere of the literal. Prynne’s early poetics shares this premise with High Modernist employment of myth in such poets as W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot; however, myth cannot be used as a framework for the process of the elucidation of man’s condition in late modernity because the stability of the concept, which derives from a transcendental certainty that there exists an ontological order that can be approached through poetic utterance, exposes it to the processes of reification inherent in Western culture. Mellors makes a pertinent point when he observes that “unlike T. S. Eliot, who could not see that the drive to mythic order was already a constituent of capitalist

dissociation of sensibility and not an alternative to it, Prynne is aware that a poetic of mythic synchronicities without complication will only buy into the rhetoric of the 'market' and the advertising executive" (Mellors, *The Spirit of Poetry...* 189). The mythical plane is not resistant to the culture industry which thrives on turning all intellectual devices into reified language, clichés whose sole imperative is that everything sell at a profit. This is the condition of the late modern anti-essentialist, discontinuous self: "Just as [it] can adopt any discourse or persona, so capitalism can market any discourse or value" (Colebrook 150). The reference to "the advertising executive" implies such an appropriation of language by the market which strives to bring all fresh metaphors down to the level of communicative articulacy; this calcification of the "vital" language of poetry into platitude was already remarked by P.B. Shelley:

[Poets'] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts. ; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. (482)

It is the poet's task to renew language but such renewal must necessarily break away from the established norms and patterns of understanding. For Shelley, all but poetic language is dead, having lost its revolutionary potential. For Prynne, the idiom appropriated by the market represents such deadness.

Therefore Prynne presses his experiment to the utmost limits of intelligibility so that his language might never ossify into a commercial product. The risk he undertakes is that his poems may sacrifice meaning on the altar of de-marketability. Robin Purves aptly comments on this slow transition beyond the Heideggerian premise and the dangers it involves:

If the earliest of Prynne's works in the *Poems* collection appear to revise his even earlier philosophical interest in phenomenology so that a re-synthesised unity of knowledge is depicted by virtue of the equivocality of poetic metaphors, which are themselves framed inside the various perceptual acts of the speakers of the poems, these relatively consistent structures of perception are largely muted or absent (and increasingly so) in the latest work. The ensuing dearth of frames in late Prynne means that the work runs the risk of reliance upon sheer, linguistic equivocality, risking their abrupt dismissal as a collection of opaque beads and their sufficiently loose, syntactical stringing, the least important thing in the world, or risking their just-as-abrupt elevation to the status of a new, Delphic oracle. (59)

The further away Prynne moves from the "structures of perception," the larger the threat that he may either be plunged into readerly oblivion or,

theoretically even more perilous, interpreted out of his critical context. The latter case would expose him to the very forces of the market which he strives to subvert in that his work, given its insurmountable equivocality, may be susceptible of wildest of interpretations. Nevertheless, the most recent poems, and *Biting the Air*, as it will be argued, is a case in point, attain an unprecedented force of expression thanks to the radical reinvention of language that takes its clarity and pertinence from a modified form of figuration inherent already in *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*.

One of the problems with language which Prynne tries to tackle in his poems is that the idiom has become subservient to economy in general and the need of incessant money circulation in particular. This point is amplified on in an early prose (in fact, “essay-like”) poem “A Note on Metal,” where Prynne posits that:

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. But gradually the item-form becomes iconized, in transitions like that from *aes rude* (irregular bits of bronze), through *aes signatum* (cast ingots or bars) to *aes grave* (the circular stamped coin). The metonymic unit is ed, and number replaces strength or power as the chief assertion of presence. (*Poems* 129)

By the metonymic association of number with power money attains greater significance than exchangeable objects. Even though the shift creates previously impossible chances for the development of trade, it is also conducive to the process of homogenisation. All aspects of human activity eventually come to be represented in monetary value, which privileges, for example, the invention of more deadly weapons over artistic production inasmuch as the former exerts immediate effects on the position of a given people in relation to its neighbours. Thus the ostensibly well-boding change paves the way to the creation of all-embracing systems of economy and hermeneutics that depends on market discourses.

It is against the backdrop of the “history of metal,” as a transition towards the hegemony of the number, that Prynne formulates his poetics. “For Prynne, poetry provides an index to the history of substance, an accidental etching of those displacements through which language traces locale and rhyme comes to approximate gold” (Blanton 131). Such emphasis on the relation of language to substance which makes the former into “a counter-currency” gives poetry a function beyond that of aesthetics. This suggestion “initiates a turn within and against the lingering abstractions of modernism itself, unleashing against the monumental structures of nation, empire, or capital that dialectical practice of de-art-ing or deaestheticization

of art in which Adorno located the possibility of aesthetic critique” (Blanton 131). Art cannot merely be an aesthetic pursuit because in this way it is sure to fall prey to reification. Therefore it is in the direction of Adorno’s perception of art that Prynne’s later poetry turns in an ever larger measure, since the task of the poem is to pull down the monumental² linguistic praxis of the day.

Adorno sees the crucial value of works of art not in their partaking of some generalizable concept of beauty but “in their power to let those things be heard which ideology conceals. Whether intended or not, their success transcends false consciousness” (Adorno 214). The great works of art, as Adorno likes to phrase it, overcome an ideological appropriation of reality by proffering an idiom that most clearly escapes the dominant modes of societally-accepted linguistic praxis. “Lyric poetry, therefore, shows itself most thoroughly integrated into society at those points where it does not repeat what society says – where it conveys no pronouncements – but rather where the speaking subject (who succeeds in his expression) comes to full accord with the language itself, i.e., with what language seeks by its own inner tendency” (Adorno 218). The purpose of art, and poetry is a most pertinent example, is to overcome the ossification of society in a twofold manner.

On the one hand “works of art are products without an obvious purpose, in a world where everything is presented as existing not for its own sake but for the sake of something else. They thus point to the fact that production is becoming the production of exchange-value for its own sake” (Jarvis 120). Referring this point to Prynne’s “A Note on Metal,” it appears that modern society plunges itself ever deeper into the realm of all-embracing systems and the power to unveil and prevent this process of increasing homogenisation lies with poetry. Adorno’s theory of the social role of poetry lays emphasis on the linguistic side of the mounting systemisation of life in that if language falls into the trap of fossilisation, that is when it strives solely for communicative expeditiousness, all human praxis must necessarily follow. Thus it is Adorno’s critique of “Lyric Poetry and Society” that underlies Prynne’s suggestion “that language might provide a counter-currency with an alternative and conscious relation to substance” (Blanton 131).

On the other hand, in poetry, language (at least theoretically) comes to enunciate its inner tendency, which is poles apart from the homogenised idiom that the society predicated on “metal” seeks. What poetry cannot harbour is the ossification of idiom and this incessant demolition of systemisation lies at the heart of language and constitutes its ownmost potential. Adorno usefully discusses the struggle with reification of language in “The Essay as Form.” He begins with drawing a parallel between the essay and art, suggesting that the former “shys away from the violence of dogma” (98).³ By dogma Adorno understands the modern infatuation with what

Prynne connotes in his idea of “metal”; pitched against all manner of systems of homogenisation and reification, the essay works primarily against received wisdoms as agents of false consciousness inasmuch as it begins with breaking up the fixedness of concepts as already-achieved patterns of knowledge. In lieu of using them as epistemic tools:

[T]he essay urges the reciprocal interaction of its concepts in the process of intellectual experience. In the essay concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of this texture. (Adorno 101)

Concepts lose their unshakeable certainty and enter into intellectual play to the same extent as does metaphoric language or art. The dialectic that is at play within the essay creates a tension between the drive away from synchronicities of systemic thought and the search for critical enlightenment. “Disaster threatens intellectual experience the more strenuously it ossifies into theory and acts as if it held the philosopher’s stone in hand” (Adorno 105–106). In order to avoid this disaster, critical thought must progress by way of dialectic which is exemplified in the essay. No theory guarantees knowledge because what it seeks is an outer vantage from which things can be made into an intelligible whole; the efficaciousness of the essay hinges on its ability to “swallow up the theories that are close by; its tendency is always towards the liquidation of opinion” therefore, as “the critical form par excellence,” the essay “constructs the immanent criticism of cultural artifacts, and it confronts that which such artifacts are with their concept; it is the critique of ideology” (Adorno 106). The essay unravels the implicit functioning of ideology in every cultural artefact, thereby pulling down the concept of the work of art as commodity.

Adorno’s critique of concepts and theories complements his perception of the role of works of art; they thwart the working of exchange-value as principal mode of social organisation and do so by subverting the domination of concepts. Poetry, similarly to the essay, breaks the reification of language not only as an epistemic conveyor but, at a more rudimentary level, as a means of unhindered communication. Thus poetry subverts the sense-making patterns in language, which are the products of the age-old hegemony of the reified system of hermeneutics.

The task of rattling the fossilised linguistic cage that is vested in poetry carries with it a number of ethical issues.⁴ The criticism of language commonplace constitutes a pertinent background for the reading of Prynne. In his later poetry, he offers an image of man as ensnared in the linguistic praxis of the day. The language of modernity is derived from the systems founded by the hegemony of “metal” and therefore it is reified into a

medium of unobstructed exchange of information. Rod Mengham observes that in *Word Order* (1989) the coherence of contemporary Western society “is seen as that of a textured surface, where certain meanings are fused together in word orders that are dictated by a ruthless economy of exchange” (“A Free Hand...” 76). Modernity is here understood as a textualized space wherein one is caught up in professional jargons such as the idioms of economy and law. Man is shackled in those jargons as is (undialectical) philosophy in its concepts. Therefore what is at stake in Prynne’s poetry⁵ (at least since *The Oval Window* [1983]) is “a perpetual reconstitution of the self” (“A Lifelong Trasnfusion...”. 207). This is the context in which *Biting the Air* may fruitfully be situated.

The title *Biting the Air* implies an act of attacking something so elusive that it is virtually immaterial. This initial remark opens the path into the book in that the individual lyrics that comprise the sequence may be argued to thematize a conflict between the individual, in the poems represented by the pronouns “you” and “he,” and what seem to be means of exerting authority: the suggestion of ubiquitous medical hazard that demands solution at all costs and the omnipresence of clichés associated with rationality; these two are underlain with a furtive desire to ascend to and retain power on the part of some unidentified forces represented throughout the sequence by the grammatical category of the imperative. The first lyric in the book, opening with an ironic mockery of the underprivileged, delimits the space of the struggle between the individual and the power-obsessed imperative. The frameless equivocality of the language mentioned by Purves is here employed in a radically paratactic manner so as to undermine the immediacy of meaning-formation. This process is at play already in the first stanza of the sequence:

Pacify rag hands attachment in for muted
counter-march or locked up going to drainage
offer some, give, none ravine platter, tied up
to kin you would desire that. [...]

The introductory phrase states firmly that “rag hands” need to be pacified. Although the synecdoche connotes the impoverished, the word “hands” seems to be engaged in a double figuration in that it not only refers to the poor but also to those who perform manual labour and are perceived as disposable rags. Also, the pacification ushers in an ambiguity that informs the whole volume. It is at no point clear whether the labourers’ anger is to be abated or whether they are to be forcefully subdued. Appeasement and subjugation mark the two strategies in the poem by means of which the imperative seeks to extend its dominion. It is against this craving for domination that the “rag hands” appear to stand up, “in for muted / counter-march.”

The response on the part of the imperative is not to arrest the “rag hands,” for that would cause serious financial losses, “locked up going for drainage.” There is a syllogistic tinge to that phrase, as though being “locked up” were necessarily to result in “drainage.” Instead of risking such setbacks, the better alternative is to “offer some, give, none ravine platter.” The labourers are to be pacified by means of deception. The surprisingly frequent distribution of commas in the above phrase makes the line equivocal; on the face of it, the offers are to be made to some and are to be made good with “none ravine platter.” However, it is only the comma that prevents the line from reading: “offer some, give none,” in which case meeting the “rag hands” requirements would only be a ploy to deter the workers from decreasing their efficiency. The injunction “you would desire that” introduces the first pronoun in the sequence, which may denote one of the strikers as well as the reader. Be it either way, the line echoes with derisive smugness of the privileged who realise that “you would desire” to be offered and given something but the gift, distributed equally among all “rag hands,” turns out to be carrying lethal connotations, since

[...] Even hand
bestowing pharmaceutical front to avoid, even
flatline signal glitz perfection, slide under be-
fore matter planning your treat advance infirm
in legal glowing stunt. [...]

Despite the use of an anacoluthon (the “front to avoid” misses the object) and parataxis (“even / flatline signal” followed by “glitz perfection”), the fragment seems to be trained on some pharmaceutical mogul which is in the process of introducing a new medicine into the market, with the implication that only a financial success matters, hence the “glitz perfection.” Nevertheless, the medicine is by no means risk-free, as the “even / flatline signal” suggests the cessation of heartbeat; the “pharmaceutical front” further amplifies the idea that an attempt is made to disguise true intentions and avoid the “slide under.” Ironically, the hint at death occurs side by side with the pronouncement of “glitz perfection.” The first stanza ends with a cynical dismissal “in legal glowing stunt” of any prospective charges against the company, while measures are undertaken so as to prevent future collisions with the law: “drug outsourcing denies active pivotal racer hot-rod.”

Thus the medical corporate world is shown to be as obsessed with commercial power struggle as any other profit-oriented branch of business. This premise puts a new slant on the imperative opening the poem in the sense that the “rag hands” might as well be those on whom the new drugs are tested and whose fears of possible pernicious side-effects need to be allayed. The medical hazard glimpsed through various implications of the company’s

shady practices is then compounded with a discourse of rationality: “glinted horizons so // blue and bright forever we say, pinching the / promised drip.” The moment the horizons are seen to be “blue and bright forever,” filling one with hopes for the future, the image shifts violently from a pastoral scene to a hospital room. The former seems to be used to dispel the fears presented by the latter and the implication at this point in the lyric is that the drip will actually remedy the patient’s condition. Yet, this image is echoed in the final stanza:

[...] it is easy to make
a country prosperous and blue and bright over
and blindness forever in hand on hand proverb.

As it is easy to reap enormous profits in the medical business, so “it is easy to make a country prosperous;” this clause, surprisingly complete and coherent for the poem, enlarges the scope of the drug company’s success to cover the general robustness of a country’s economy with the suggestion that the success necessitates as well as depends on “blindness forever in hand on hand proverb.” The premise the poem elaborates is that a ruthless pursuit of financial gains is inextricably linked with the proverbial, and therefore rational and generally accepted, language. Just as the seeming hopefulness of the doctors, hopefully administering a drip, is tainted with blindness and personal desire for prosperity, so the country striving to become “blue and bright over” is shown to work on the above-mentioned assumption: “offer some, give, none.”

However, the last line of the first lyric in the sequence presents a complex denunciation of the proverbiality of language. The particular words cannot be ultimately fitted into a complete clause because there are a number of feasible ways of reading them, each syntactically valid. To mention just a few: 1) is the proverb “hand on hand,” suggesting agreement and perhaps clarity of expression? Or 2) is there a separation between “in hand,” as in having available or under control, and “on hand,” implying availability to proffer help? Or, still further, 3) is “blindness forever in hand,” indicating that the blindness is under control, and the last two nouns should be read as a single noun phrase: “hand proverb.” Even though there are still other possibilities inherent in that line, the three suffice to note the impossibility of a singleness of meaning which rationality might crave. Even in the seemingly comprehensible utterances, words retain their capacity for producing incommensurate meanings.

Throughout the sequence the notions of medical hazard and rational language are returned to and always their appearance is informed by the imperative (both as an injunction and a suggestion of utmost importance) to muster and command ever greater authority which is regarded as the ability

to enforce a given viewpoint. The viewpoint, in turn, is designed to keep people in the dark as to the true intentions of the imperative. As a result, its commands have only one, authoritarian meaning and, even if the words used in them can admit of a figurative reading, all other interpretations are dismissed as insignificant, “deny several utter margin.” The individual, a “you” or a “he,” is either threatened with “Thick mitts for / an early start,” or “Sated to a faculty / with snack extras.” What violence cannot achieve, persistent persuasion and demagoguery will: “By rate / entertainment we can bring it off, as on tap / to drug the market focus” and if the “bantling screamers” elect to oppose the imperative, “You know what this must / mean in forward trading.” Throughout the poem instances of proverbial language, impelling one to follow their ostensibly incontrovertible rationality, crop up so as to strengthen the logic promoted by the imperative: “Don’t make sores if / you can’t pay to dress their origin,” or to induce one to cooperate with the system by offering them some legal deals: “Step to the bar. Be a credit / witness. Speak real slow and with pauses.”

The medical/economic drive towards extending the hegemony over “rag hands” and the emphasis on proverbial language as the agents of rationality comprise the scene of reification in *Biting the Air*. Adorno’s ideas put forward in his analysis of the social role of poetry and the form of the essay undergird Prynne’s vision of late modernity as it is presented in the volume. Since, according to Adorno, poetry is best integrated in society when it says what society does not or cannot, it serves to expose the falsity of the medical hazard, the “fastidious report” which asserts in a tone of a Yeatsian prophecy that “This is the cancerous lace curtain fringing / a lake of toxic refuse, waiting to be born.” The imminent toxic catastrophe is covered up with “lace curtain fringing” whose surface may appear pleasant to the eye but it hides a dangerous truth. In order that the disguise might be revealed for what it is, a desire to maintain power at all costs, the proverbial language must be unmade. The possible resistance to reification of language is implied by the formal arrangement of Prynne’s sequence that speaks outside the dominant word order.

Consider, for example, one of the final sections of the sequence:

[...] Want more why otherwise
if you’ve only that so hoarse stop the spread,
make a child barrier clearance. Unsophisticated lips,
grand molars, ring ahead for service depending here
and now on homage to order [...].

The passage begins with what looks like a question, as in “Want more?” But the question mark is replaced with an interrogative pronoun “why,” thus introducing an indirect question that, in turn, is followed by a conditional

clause. This conditional, however, is interrupted with what appears to be an exclamation but again the exclamation mark is missing, substituted with an imperative “stop the spread.” What “spread” is meant opens to a plethora of meanings: the spread of “a fever racing across unbarred prime locations” that is mentioned in the following stanza but also the spread of the “Minute-men blather” or possibly the disjunctive, paratactic procedure of the whole poem; still wider circles of meanings accrue *ad infinitum*. It is this “veering” of sense, as Nicholas Royle has recently called the potential of literary language for sudden swerves between irreconcilable trains of meanings (Royle 2011: 38–39), that resists the “homage to order.”

This, however, does not mean that *Biting the Air* “will not communicate,” to quote a fine conclusion of W. H. Auden’s “The Watershed” (33), for Prynne arranges his anacolutha to evoke certain interrelations of words that create tensions. In the case of *Biting the Air*, these tensions seem to revolve around the notions of deception and subjugation through the rational, proverbial language pitched against resistance and perpetual destabilisation of meaning that open the idiom to larger fields of signification. The above fragment brings in associations with child-abuse (“a child barrier clearance”), aristocratic exploitation of the underprivileged (“ring ahead for service”) and man’s primitive instincts (“unsophisticated lips, / grand molars”). Each of these evocations paves the way for a different story but the dominant idea does not change: the unfair hegemony of “order” that the poem attempts to resist by parataxis, frequent use of anacolutha and strings of metonymies that offer diversified interpretive paths. Since the imperative cannot be criticised in its own word-order, for it would devour the indictments and reify them into a set of clichés, Prynne seeks to speak out through an idiom so pluralised and self-questioning as to prevent its easy consumption. In this sense, he joins Samuel Beckett, Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, all of whom Adorno commended as resisters of the process of ideological reification of modernity.

Biting the Air addresses a pressing moral concern of the place of the individual in late modern society. The present is repeatedly demonstrated to be a space of illusions whose sole task is to ensure that the highest possible profits are made. In order to oppose that situation, as it appears, it is the language that needs to be emancipated and, to refer to one of Prynne’s principal precursors, allowed to remain “charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree,” for “If a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays” (Pound 1960: 28, 32). Pound’s dictum finds its late modern implementation in *Biting the Air* as well as in most of the later Prynne. Singleness and stability, synonymous with the Poundian atrophy, derive from reification, the Shelleyan “deadness to all nobler purposes of human intercourse” and provide only apparent comfort, for it is in the constant breaking apart and restitution of language that a promise of freedom inheres.

As Prynne puts it in the ending of *Biting the Air*, “break a limit verge” or “be the shadow unendurably now calibrated.”

NOTES

¹ Although Mellors omits to draw that parallel, “the false literal” understood as manacles in which man’s thinking is imprisoned may be referred to Heidegger’s idea that, among others, everyday language, idle talk, effects man’s reduction to a resource to be optimized; this process of curtailment Heidegger calls enframing (*Gestell*) and sees great art as capable of overcoming the stasis which enframing creates. This point is analysed at length by Iain D. Thomson in *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (42–48).

² The meaning of “monumental” seems to be underlain with Nietzsche’s critique of monumental history with “its depreciation of what cannot be universalized, of the individual, the detailed, the marginal, and the peripheral” (Lemm 97). It is obvious then that Prynne’s criticism of “metal economy” as subsuming all individual differences under the banner of numbers corresponds to Nietzsche’s excoriation of monumental history. Nietzsche is also scathing of the empowerment of the number in all areas, not only economy, since “the invention of the laws of numbers was made on the basis of the error [...] that there are identical things;” together with the presupposition that there are some essences undergirding everything “we are fabricating beings, unities which do not exist” (56).

³ Further on in the essay, Adorno advocates the close affinity the essay shares with art in terms of the disparity between the mode of presentation and the subject matter; he notes that “The consciousness of the non-identity between presentation and presented material forces the form to make unlimited efforts. In that respect alone the essay resembles art” (105).

⁴ Purves, analyzing the ethical problems involved in the composition of Prynne’s *Not-You* (1993), proffers some valuable insights into this dimension of Prynne’s writing as a whole (58–60).

⁵ And what may feature among the responsibilities of poets for the language, which Prynne discusses in his seminal essay “Huts.” At the end he observes that “As readers we do know, finally, that ruin and part-ruin lie about us on all sides, and so do the poets. It is needful and also better, finally, that this be most fully known. The poets are how we know this, are how we may dwell not somewhere else but where we are” (631–632).

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