

## Proud Flesh

JOHN WILKINSON was born in London in 1953 and grew up in Cornwall and Devon. After a career in mental health work in Birmingham, Swansea and East London, in 2005 he joined the Keough Institute for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame, as Poet in Residence, and teaches in the Department of English. With his wife, the literary critic Maud Ellmann, he lives between Mishawaka, IN and Cambridge, England.

DREW MILNE is the Judith E Wilson Lecturer in Drama and Poetry, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge. His books include *The Damage* (Salt, 2001) and *Go Figure* (Salt, 2003).  
<http://drewmilne.tripod.com>

Also by John Wilkinson:

*Oort's Cloud* (Barque/Subpress Collective, 1999)

*Effigies Against the Light* (Salt, 2001)

*Signs of an Intruder* (Paratixis Editions, 2001)

*Contrivances* (Salt, 2003)

*Iphigenia* (Barque, 2004)

# Proud Flesh

JOHN WILKINSON

*Introduction by Drew Milne*



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING  
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO CB1 5JX United Kingdom  
PO Box 202, Applecross, Western Australia 6153

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First published by Délires and Equofinality 1986  
Second edition 2005

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 9.5 / 13

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ISBN-13 978 1 84471 065 2 paperback  
ISBN-10 1 84471 065 3 paperback

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## Acknowledgements

*Proud Flesh* was published first in 1986 by Equofinality, Łódz, and Délire, Liverpool—exotic marks of origin which for Délire meant Geoff Ward and Lynette Hunter, who had published my previous book, *Clinical Notes*, and for Equofinality meant Rod Mengham, then a British Council lecturer in Poland, and my editorial collaborator in the journal of that name. All three publishers were impoverished junior academics in 1986, and put their scarce money and time into the book's appearance. I remain grateful to them.

The text of this new edition was prepared by Beric Livingstone, whose scrupulous care identified a number of errors which had escaped me.

The poems were written in Bournville, Birmingham, where I hope the house's fig tree still bears its hard fruit.

JOHN WILKINSON  
CAMBRIDGE 2005



## Introduction

By Drew Milne

Some of *Proud Flesh*'s initial intrigue lay in the book's physical appearance. The first edition sported a simple unglorious card cover with a colour approaching blood red: no backcover blurbs, no bar code, no notes on the author or photograph, not even stuff about the publishers. The title page identified the publishers as a mysterious compound: Equofinality out of Łodz, Poland, and Délires from Liverpool. In the mid 1980s Liverpool was associated more with militant politics than post-modern poetics. Collaboration with Poland hinted at hands across the cold war, a letter from Brezhnev with a sound track by the Gang of Four—the post-punk rockers rather than some post-Maoist cell dishing out fanzines from the ivory tower. In those long off days, when *google* wasn't yet a verb, it would have taken quite a bit of research to reveal the guiding spirits behind the book. A distribution address in Birmingham only hinted at John Wilkinson's context of production, the place where most of these poems were written.

Too much can be made of such networks, as though the underlying reality were the Cambridge nexus that forged many such connections. The confident anonymity of *Proud Flesh*'s publishers indicated that the book was the thing, not the group hug of affiliations and prize citations designed to reassure the wary. Even the epigraphs were tucked away at the back of the book, suggesting the need for a prior encounter with the text itself. This relatively austere mode of publication could have been mistaken for a late flowering of pure poetry, as if proximity to critical gossip were poison to art. More to the point, however, were the energies of independent publishing. Absence of hype suggested a post-punk resistance to commercial packaging, but also a commitment to the excitement of discovering work shorn of filters and branding, as if introductory and mediating gestures were

best kept to a minimum. The distance from the protocols of academic presses and trade paperbacks indicated social hopes.

It's worth pausing over shifting publication contexts, lest historical differences collapse too quickly into false familiarity. In truth, however, the matter of the text remains the thing. Minor differences of presentation—such as 'aperatif' now altered to 'aperitif'—can be left to first edition fetishists and scholars of textual variants. More important is some recognition of this book's conceptuality as poetic sequence, as a *book* of poetry, as 'text' even, rather than as pure poetry or poetry as such. In the 1980s, before *text* became a verb associated with mobile phones, the poetics of text and textuality suggested debates exemplified by Roland Barthes' essay 'From Work to Text'.<sup>1</sup> Synthesizing diffuse currents, Barthes positioned 'text' as an orientation: conceiving writing as a methodological field, as a productive activity rather than as an object or finished product to be consumed. Oriented to process rather than to stable conventions or classical forms, texts develop writing as a decomposition of traditional hierarchies and genres, producing a space in which no one language has authority over any other. Despite the efforts of prose fundamentalists and latter-day prosodic traditionalists, the situation of contemporary language unsettles any tidy hierarchy of prose over poetry, or of poetry over prose.

The orientation to *text* suggested by Barthes marked one attempt to conceptualise the tendencies of avant-garde *writing* amid the ruins of traditional genres. Many of Wilkinson's contemporaries produced difficult or hermetic poems without challenging the authority of poetry as such, sometimes relying on 'Poetry' with a capital 'P' as the implicit authority motivating otherwise arbitrary collages and assemblages, as if poetry could be seized as some commanding height of meaning. Wilkinson, by contrast, has produced a series of poetic sequences which evidently engage with the traditions, languages and protocols of poetry, especially lyric poetry, but which turn such conventions against themselves. Rather than abandoning or excluding poetry in favour of a prose textuality made up of every other type of language or discourse, questions about the power of poetry

continue to animate Wilkinson's texts. For those nervous of traditional poetic forms, perhaps the most alarming regularity in *Proud Flesh* is the four line stanza that figures as a shape on so many pages. *Proud Flesh* also offers challenging encounters with the gendered power relations conjured by pronouns such as 'he' and 'she', as if the reader were asked to journey into some new Baudelairean *fleurs du mal*. These, and other remnants of poetic convention, position *Proud Flesh* as a text still recognisable as a collection of poems, working through lyric process in ways akin to modernism's sceptical reworking of late romanticism. Wilkinson's writing nevertheless weaves individual 'poems' into sequences, developing a texture of poetic fragments within larger language frames and serial patterns. A sense of this orientation to writing as *text* and the associated theoretical debates, helps to specify the critical context against which *Proud Flesh* offered an unusual departure. This text, along with Wilkinson's subsequent books, emerges, accordingly, as a late modernist exploration into the limits of poetry, engaging with post-modern conceptions of writing, but reluctant to join with those for whom 'poetry' should become subject to the force of a historical taboo.

*Proud Flesh* might then seem to resemble a collection of poems, but this is nowhere stated in the book as such, save as an intimation of the way a diversity of texts are laid out on the page *as if* they were poems, *as if* the conventions of lineation and white space might still be read as poetic conventions. Each page can be read either as a singular poem or as text, either as an example of poetry or as part of a field of textuality constructed by this book. Something similar is true of the status of what might be construed as representations of subjective experience in *Proud Flesh*. It is hard not to read a number of pages as poems articulating experiential reflections—memories, dreams, fantasies, desires, pillow talk—reflections, it might be inferred, upon an ongoing but private sub-text. As a sequence of poems and as text, *Proud Flesh* nevertheless makes it possible to perceive this language of experience as a series of social frames, as social and aesthetic discourses mediating and enabling experience, in short as experiences *of* language rather than experiences *in* language. As well as being overdetermined

by the framing of experience as ‘poetry’—what would love between two people be if it had no poetry?—the mediation of impulses as lyric impulses also inhibits, prevents, falsifies even, the very types of experience lyric traditionally seeks to represent. Reading each page as a lyric fragment nevertheless brings the reader up against frames which suggest family resemblances and associations shared by different pages and across the book as a ‘whole’. Sustained reading of the whole nevertheless cannot quite take the book as a ‘whole’, cannot quite find a coherent structure or system of meaning. Shared cadences and pulses become recognizable, along with overlapping clusters and diffuse discursive modes. But the idea that there might be some conceptual structure or paradigm articulating the book as a whole reveals itself as a fantasy, no more or less plausible than a variety of other ways of coping or responding, including the desire to control meaning or language. Read as *text*, the book evades interpretation according to an architectonic, conceptual or procedural core, remaining provisional, differential and improvised. This internal differentiation and resistance to system nevertheless involves deliberation amid competing determinations, a dance of the intellect which is more than accidental or the result of some arbitrary rule. Each page or poem is not an instance of some underlying conceptual or cognitive paradigm, such as phenomenology or psychoanalysis, but one among a series of texts whose differences from each other determine the book’s textual space.

*Proud Flesh* develops its own textual arena, then, both close to the limits of poetry as an orientation to meaning and yet sceptical of heroic conceptual paradigms that seek to subsume poetry within some other hierarchy of meaning or cognition. This orientation to text and textuality helps to illuminate the awkward status of ‘lyric’ in *Proud Flesh*. Introducing a recent anthology of contemporary poetry in which Wilkinson’s work is featured, Rod Mengham argues that what binds together the anthology’s ‘various kinds of innovative practice is a strong insistence on finding ways of continuing and renewing the lyric impulse in poetry in English’.<sup>2</sup> A number of poets in the anthology would query this characterisation, but Wilkinson’s texts

bring the problem into sharp relief, appearing both to affirm and to undermine the centrality of lyric impulses. Understood as sequential texts, as collected fragments of a larger texture which does not cohere into an organic or singular work, Wilkinson's procedures foreground both the desire for lyric affirmation and a necessary unsettling of the face values associated with lyric. Citing John Wieners as a precedent, Wilkinson himself has suggested in an interview that: 'the words from the lyric are something so compromised or so difficult to simply accept, at the very moment of lyric impulse there is also a negation of that, and to that extent I feel that almost everything I do is a sort of failed love poem.'<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on negation and failure marks out a very different conception of writing from the self-preening associated with affirmative, achieved work or, perhaps more critically, from the supposedly humble tone of tentatively tremulous sensitivity which still passes for poetic perception in some circles. Wilkinson's sequences have a characteristic generosity and dynamic extension but with a no less energetic capacity to deflate and deflect. This negation of lyric impulse is not a procedural negativity, however, working through irony or satire, but a lack of composure, a discomfort within the energy of composition:

*Proud Flesh* more than any other of my extended works represents an attempt to write a love poem, a short love poem. And it represents a repeated and I hope interesting failure to do so. It tackles centrally the question of relative power in an erotic relationship, or in an erotic need. It questions erotic need at the very moment that it arises, and at the moment that it would govern the making of the text. It is uncomfortable with the projections into the loved one which are the basis of the erotic need. It's uncomfortable with the colonization of the loved one by those projections. This is the central material of the text. The loved one in *Proud Flesh* is white, is marble, is ice, is a place which is animated by the lover; who himself is white, marble and ice and animated by the loved one. It's full of mirrors.<sup>4</sup>

Such retrospective authorial reflections ought to be taken with pinches of salt, but notice the tension here between the projections of love lyric and the materiality of *text*. The exploration of love, power and lyric in *Proud Flesh* is as much concerned to negate the lyric impulse as with any attempt to renew or reaffirm the love lyric.

The quality of negation in *Proud Flesh* develops differentially, rather than dialectically. David Trotter's early characterization of John Wilkinson's writing, republished in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, contrasts Wilkinson's writing with 'dialectical lyric':

Dialectical lyric stages the drama of the 'advertising mind', in Shelley's phrase, the mind turned toward a 'vastness' which reveals itself as a lack: disenfranchised, internally riven . . . The lyric voice dialectically opposed to the unsayable, discovers itself as a lack . . . The texts of Mengham and Wilkinson . . . are not predicated upon any such absenting moment (the generation of antithesis *out of* thesis) but rather upon the multiple infliction of one thesis on another, *different* thesis. . . . We have entered a Nietzschean world where forces don't enter into relation with opposites they themselves have generated, but with other forces . . .<sup>5</sup>

There's something uncomfortable with anything so blunt as the making of a thesis in *Proud Flesh*. The text is nevertheless strewn with assertions, exclamations and rhetorical questions that could be mistaken for programmatic propositions if abstracted from the play of forces at work in the book, as if the presiding spirit were some latter-day Nietzschean like the Gilles Deleuze of *Anti-Oedipus*.<sup>6</sup> Lines such as: 'Sentiments are reasons / through our flesh, they sport over the synapse & we move . . .' (p. 12) make explicit strains of argument in the texture, notably the way 'flesh' is animated by desires, images and language, but this is a textual synopsis which conflates any stable condition of analogy. One of the most arresting opening lines seems to invite a reading of the text as a literary exploration of psychoanalytic object relations theory, but subsequent lines deflate the pretensions of such rhetoric, refocussing attention on poetic grammars: 'O where is

the breast I left part of my mouth on? / Where did I leave off? & when you decipher me / will you find a nothing's opposite, a mere lump / or tease a catch-all cradle from my fine twist? // No-one holds to categories. The one threatening was / the one who did, the one who faked, found / truth at the end of a false trail. The character / & the nullity both bleed with unfinished business' (p. 50). Unfinished and incomplete, this is negation as difference, a reanimation of dead categories and dead metaphors, which ebbs and flows rather than becoming newly determinate.

A key juxtaposition is the mutation of the language of poetic sentiment through the quasi-scientific language of biology and brain chemistry: 'A longitudinal slice of the brain / will show two lovers fade in porcelain light to chinoiserie / that as false origin indurates' (p. 59), or 'Eyes pitched up to the dura mater. Since you were loved, so / you gain advantage. Will shrivels as tardive dyskinesia' (p. 61). Most readers will need a dictionary to follow some of the semantic loops involved. Wilkinson's work engages an exceptionally wide-ranging lexicon, but this engagement also invokes a developed scepticism for the ambiguities revealed by definitions. This much is clear from the epigraph from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, which appears to locate the semantic field of the book's title in relation to clinical or medical language, as if the texts that make up the book were growths built on or around healing wounds. Medical language is one of the resources explored in the book, but the text of *Proud Flesh* exceeds such definition, suggesting a poetics of metaphor and analogy, one much animated by the resources of adjectival compounds, from 'unshockable plasm' or 'cool romance' to 'lax spring' and 'reckless salvo'. Recklessly transgressing Poundian and objectivist injunctions against such uses of the adjective, the resulting compounds become unnervingly productive nodes of meaning, transitional turns in which discourses crash and splinter. One word put under particular strain by this text is 'like'. Simile after simile puts pressure on the powers of analogy-making, but this staple of lyric enlargement becomes a suspiciously promiscuous projection: 'She assimilates all comparison into her like . . . // from clouds of *so like her* . . . // . . . these our pranks /

frequent her like witnesses, o intense inane / they jostle, even the stars are like stops / that shearing a torso out of fierce love // colonize its phantom limbs to prove her body' (p. 77). The troubling ratio of living beings to idealised or aestheticised figures, alluded to in the other concluding epigraph, undermines the desire for similes rather than affirming the evident fecundity with which this writing produces similes: 'Can this be how we inflate // our meaning presence from our demeaned lives / caressing the part-payments?' (p. 75) Counting the cost of the lyric impulse generates a text whose interest is the reverse of the inflated poetics of achievement. Among the many pleasures afforded by this differential text are its glimpses of freedom from the lyrical poetics of love.

- 1 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', *Image / Music / Text*, ed. & trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 155-164.
- 2 Rod Mengham, 'Introduction', *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems*, eds. John Kinsella and Rod Mengham (Cambridge: Salt, 2004), pp. xvii-xix (p. xix).
- 3 'The John Wilkinson Interview', *Angel Exhaust* 8 (1992), 76-90 (79).
- 4 'The John Wilkinson Interview, part 2', *Angel Exhaust* 9 (1993), 69-77 (70).
- 5 David Trotter, 'Voices-Off: Mengham and Wilkinson', *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, eds. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), pp. 251-3 (pp. 251-2).
- 6 Cf. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1983).

Proud Flesh



Slender pickings fall to the lap of the foster-child  
who chides them into their own spheres, the nuclei  
of unshockable plasm, home like everything he touches  
will be compèred by the memories they create before

dust settles, spawn begins to heave. Is he socially  
acceptable? Does he use a knife & fork with facility?  
Will he boil his underwear, when living in the world  
where prompts are few? Do you rate his speech lucid?

does he spill his life-blood over a phrase, & refuse  
to clear up? The quills he flurries from his spine  
thread these poor facts of life, draw them out & turn  
the loops separately to tap his fluid. Any capsule

of love, any midnight pearl, has had him for a unique  
sponsor to its quality, concocting in his parietal  
lobe a cool romance. There, for this gaunt clarity  
its positive was pressed to a dilapidated back-yard

They bash their fists on the asphalt playground, as if  
they could crush the stone below; soft fists splinter  
A) ache, B) pale white secure, C) deep white safeline  
Sparks from the mica fan into veins, & tar-thick milk

shrouds the quartz, jade, or plumps that rose-quartz  
hollow under its bitumen teat. We turn through shades  
but click in the small white statue smelling of milk  
with human dirt, with a sweet taint. O my boat, beat

downstream in the tunnel, your pennants & gypsy décor  
nosing the sedge already for cute traces of light; ray  
out as emerging you leave your heart behind. Children  
beat this vault with their fists, & their fists bleed

Every metaphor sounds the same  
in its sepia, dry blood melancholy

but if you cry, it drips blood  
onto the quarry tiles

so you hasten for the authentic  
rasp of the next & the next

leaving behind you dying homunculae

Clay when the wire slackens, sheds its velvet light  
self-contained. No secret gleams out of the cleft  
You take off an outside, make something of it. Take  
the next outside, turn it too for the light's vessel

All the gang of your dreams rises out of the crease  
you've lit, fanning with fruit beside the escalier  
loaded with green pods of flesh. Your scooped shells  
lie scattered & whitening, lime for the tree-roots

Your griefs will have worked the beautiful trellises  
that fig has scaled; & a swag of fruit, the alien  
pelf will be plumped in intimate gifts at your feet  
Clay pods, they swell in your dreams' commissariat

bulging out like a thumb; or in a civic statuary made  
lush as the poor transfigured lives are fed to the  
moloch of sleepy entanglement. Time they shall stick  
for any respite, from time that knackers the flesh

splitting off over the dunes, in the cupped light  
they quaff & by which they pay homage. Their figtree  
staggers with leaden fruit, & the almond chokes up  
floss. Outside are these witnesses to your fashion

We'd launch out, but a spiral failure binds so close  
our dwindling inner city. Moths form their tiny scrip  
with charred wings, flock the arena though we twist  
a loop from their royal flight; fatty it too with coils

scarred indelibly now drops through lipid space; what  
vertical links, agents, forwarding or poste restante  
can ever again grip the headstalk! With every reason  
moths subdue the heart, reinforce its white bulwark

swift as a bat to sound our ugly orphans, to flush  
the always-dear. They screw the head for kaleidoscope  
how our dreams squawk! No choice but stand to reason  
soon as look at a festered heart there's no two ways

but pitfall in a dead-stick-loop, but the backfire  
from tongues which churn our spectra, which speculate  
our sightedness; no, such canutes flesh the dry flesh  
like a can of figs. Past help, & all saving. Reason

shuts the window tight & grouts the wall with cilia  
mapping our neural paths; that moon we stir to launch  
will only sail as transom for a moss-scented flush  
of white peaks, rooftops, leaching the stooped pylon

He smears  
fresh shit on his hands

he holds  
them up with his arms

O fleece them  
with blonde hair

thick as trowel, honky  
ice

Doors open to the metal crash of insects, & outside  
the first stain of lichen bulks on blotting-paper  
Capercailzie shriek. A buzz-saw coughs. Men pull  
off, in hoof-prints they leave behind them. Hounds

chew their hide loops & totter about the shithouse:  
All pain is deliberate, or it will be if it isn't  
tractable to daddy's smirch, watch it in the mirror  
Self-absorbed we might be, yet cruelly given over

to those micro-organisms swimming through our eyes  
My face is what I see. You grind me for a choice  
of if to grind me. You should, you might have done  
within your rights. But the musculature degenerates

cells disperse to every joint & reach the brain  
The outside world convulses like a coseismic web  
It's 'non-organ-specific'. Rivers start to appear  
& elms to creak. Kine appear to fall at their knees

In the losing light, see, your head  
tilts to a cold frame outside  
filled with refuse. There the rusty  
maiden turns unadorned, & creaks  
fearfully at the verge of stupor

Shifts of light fail, but one near  
command of wind can cause her  
still to vary, unselfconscious  
out cold. So the one or other  
left & right, you and she descant

holding, as the dusk a birdcall  
sustains, a gleam, one component  
saved from an intense group  
You, the wanted understanding  
sap the kaolin heaps, tighten grass

while you perfect your half-face  
& see, white water's fret disturbs  
lively mud, throwing glances  
like a retrospective crystal. As I  
will be, I had every cause to think

I was. But she grinds in her condyl  
all that's known by heart  
cloaks the tongue your counter-  
poise would furl back. She refers  
foreign calls to her program

planting a likeness in plain air  
cricking the field's neck  
to evade you. Ill-matched couples  
spit, & a cone, a pine gland  
burns next to this silent area