

The Lyric Touch
Essays on the Poetry of Excess

JOHN WILKINSON



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge PDO cb21 5jx United Kingdom

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First published 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Lightning Source

Typeset in Swift 10/12

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ISBN 978 1 84471 395 0 paperback

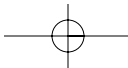
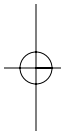
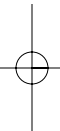
Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



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Acknowledgments

Drew Milne and Chris Emery encouraged me to assemble this collection, or something like it.

For practical help, I would like to thank Drew Milne and Andrew Duncan who provided copies of essays, and Cheryl Reed of The University of Notre Dame for retyping essays produced originally on a typewriter or Atari ST computer.

My debt to the original publishers of these essays is considerable.

The essays collected here were published previously as follows, in order of first appearance:

‘Cadence’

Reality Studios vol.9, London 1988 [dated 1987], pp.81–5.

‘Illyrian Places’

Parataxis 6, Brighton, Spring/Summer 1994, pp.58–69.

‘A Single Striking Soviet: The Poetry of Barry MacSweeney’

as ‘The Tempers of Hazard part 2: the Poems of Barry MacSweeney’, *Angel Exhaust* 11, Cambridge, Winter 1994 [actually 1995], pp.55–74.

‘The Line to Take: An appreciation of the seventies poetry of John James’

as ‘Mexican Stand-Off in Practical Bondage Gear: An appreciation of the seventies poetry of John James’, *Angel Exhaust* 13, Cambridge, Spring 1996, pp.80–91.

‘The Metastases of Poetry’

Parataxis 8/9, Brighton 1996, pp.49–55.

‘Counterfactual Prynne: An Approach to *Not-You*’

Parataxis 8/9, Brighton 1996, pp.190–202.

‘Too-Close Reading: Poetry and Schizophrenia’

The Gig 1, November 1998, Ontario, Canada, pp.41–53 [Reprinted in ed. Romana Huk, *Assembling Alternatives*, Wesleyan UP 2003, pp.364–374].

'Mouthing Off'

QUID 7c, April 2001, Cambridge, pp.2-9.

'Frostwork and The Mud Vision'

The Cambridge Quarterly vol 31 no 1, Cambridge, March 2002, pp.93-105.

'Tripping the Light Fantastic: Tom Raworth's *Ace*'

in ed. Dorward, *Removed for Further Study: The Poetry of Tom Raworth, The Gig 13/14*, Toronto 2003, pp.145-160.

'The Value of *Penniless Politics*'

Poetry Review vol 93 no 2, London, Summer 2003, pp.62-70.

'Chamber Attitudes'

The present text conflates the two articles: 'Chamber Attitudes', *Jacket* 21, <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/21/wilk-wien.html>, posted March 2005 and 'A Tour of the State Capitol: Introducing the poems of John Wieners', *Edinburgh Review* 114, Edinburgh 2005 (dated 2004), pp.96-125.

'Faktura: The Work of Marjorie Welsh'

Chicago Review vol.51 no.3, Autumn 2005, pp.115-127.

'Into the Day'

QUID 17, For J.H. Prynne. In *Celebration*. Brighton, 24th June 2006, pp.29-31.

'The Water-Rail of Tides'.

Published as 'The Brain's Tent' in *Boston Review* vol.31, no.5, Sept/Oct 2006, pp.49-50

Off the Grid: Lyric and Politics in Andrea Brady's? *Embrace*

Chicago Review? vo.53 no.1, Spring 2007, pp.95-115.

'Following the Poem' is a previously unpublished lecture, delivered at The University of Notre Dame in 2004.

In Press

'Unexpected Excellent Sausage', ed. Simon Perril, *The Salt Companion to John James*
'A Poem for Liars', ed. David Hillman and Adam Phillips, *The Book of Interruptions*
Stumbling, Balking, Tacking: Robert Creeley's *For Love* and Mina Loy's *Love Songs*
to *Joannes*, ed. Rachel Potter, *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*

Introduction

The present book is not a complete collection of my prose writing of the past thirty years; I have excluded articles concerned largely with mental health and public health matters, and literary-critical articles which now seem to me ungenerous or pointless. For reasons of space I have been obliged also to remove a number of shorter reviews, including those of books by Rod Mengham, D.S. Marriott, Drew Milne, Simon Jarvis, Andrew Duncan and Keston Sutherland. I regret this, but the exigency may stimulate me to more extended consideration of these notable writers on other occasions. Among British poets I would have liked to write about W.S. Graham, Allen Fisher, Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Mark Hyatt; again, this must wait. And the writing of some of the greatest American poets of the last half-century, Frank O'Hara and Barbara Guest, remains a summons to attention and emotional alacrity, and reproaches my lackadaisical ways.

The earliest articles have been lightly edited, mainly to remove asides I now find embarrassing, and to reduce traces of an oracular prose style. The articles were written for widely different publications, from mimeo worksheets to cultural magazines to peer-reviewed academic journals, and this shows. However, spelling and punctuation have been standardised to British usage of an informal academic kind.

Reviewing these pieces, the title offered itself readily enough. The collection finds a continuing preoccupation with the seductions of lyric, in a pulse of succumbing and resistance discerned within the poems it reads as well as in these responses. The poems include those of John Wieners, characterised by emotional and linguistic extremity, of Denise Riley, by lyric auto deconstruction and reconstruction, and of J.H. Prynne, characterised by intellectual ambition, astonishing rhetorical

[2]

The Lyric Touch

resources, and at the last, by the compensatory joys of the lyric counterfactuals they embody. I have been surprised to discover Laura (Riding) Jackson shadowing this book as suggestive of the costs which an excessive investment in lyric poetry might incur; and by an emerging understanding of Frank O'Hara as having instigated a dialogic lyric practice which suggests a way out of the romantic-modernist and individualist matrix inhabited (and quarrelled with) by the poets of excess.

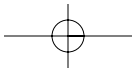
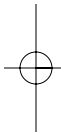
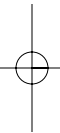
This collection includes essays and talks concerned with my own poetry. Until recently I worked outside the academy; and even now I regret and resent the tendency to separate literary studies from 'creative writing'. While the writing addressed in the book is hopelessly 'unrepresentative', reflecting a sensibility trained in particular places at a particular time, such partiality goes along with an intense need to argue, for myself as well as for others, the value of poets scarcely heard of when I was writing. This is the kind of thing poets should do, and which the academy should better appreciate and promote.

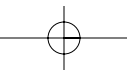
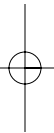
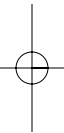
I was taught to read poetry by two remarkable schoolmasters, Derek Rosser at Sherborne School and Brian Worthington at Clifton College. At Sherborne I enjoyed the several advantages of being introduced to contemporary poetry by Charles Verey, Thomas A. Clark and Lawrence Pedersen; of a school library with a fine collection of poetry of all periods; and of two bookshops (in this small town in a conservative part of England), each of them with a better literature selection than any bookshop in present-day Cambridge, and both selling a good range of small-press poetry books. At Cambridge I was taught by Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe, and above all by J.H. Prynne. Charles Lambert introduced me to the poetry of John Wieners, and Geoffrey Ward and Rod Mengham to much else. Wendy Mulford opened my eyes to contemporary writing by women. The more recent essays have benefited from Maud Ellmann's fine scrutiny. With such advantages I should have done better and should have done more, but at least I can record my gratitude.

Mishawaka, IN
February 2007



1: British Poetry





Counterfactual Prynne: An Approach to Not-You

The first poem in *Not-You* brings into focus a range of questions about poetic reading.¹ Given this poem opens a book-length sequence, can we anticipate its completion through what is to follow, so it will make sense in the light of cumulative information? Or knowing, if we do, something of the writing of J.H. Prynne, can we bring knowledge of established concerns and poetic procedures to make sense of these lines, as it were episodic in a continuing poem, or paralleled by previous poems? Is the reader to bring some specialised extrinsic knowledge to bear, and to what extent would that make the poem amenable? For instance:

The twins blink, hands set to thread out
a dipper cargo with lithium grease enhanced
to break under heat stress

might conjure up a discourse around the affective operations of memory, owing to use of lithium salts in psycho-pharmacology as a mood-stabiliser, the twins then becoming cyclothymic polarities; and such an association then colours at once a provisional understanding of the poem. Yet this must remain provisional, given the oddity of ‘lithium grease’, which however tenable is ‘lithium’ within the provisional reading, suggests a different discourse reconciling ‘lithium’ with ‘grease’. So the reader might advert to lithium in watch-batteries, associating both “same-day retread” and “mark | two transfiguration” with opposed accounts of time—either the repetitiveness of a contained and mechanical entity, or ‘human time’. Still, lithium occurs chiefly as a salt, and it is difficult to envisage the chemical transformation of salt into grease, which metaphorically and chemically occupies another category. And

the whole of this opening poem is fraught with contradiction, indecision, opposition and duplicity. It is this the clew to follow?²

Several commentators have discussed the seeming non-referentiality and paradoxical authority of Prynne's definite articles, and of the specialised vocabularies he deploys. Who are the twins? To what discourse does a "mark | two transfiguration" attach, and do we need to know?

There may be two broad ways to follow, each branching into tributaries. The first is to seek firm footing in the opening poem, on the assumption it will provide a key to what follows. One tactic here would be exegetical, and lead into reference books and dictionaries. Perhaps any serious reader of Prynne is familiar with dictionary neurosis, whereby trust in one's grasp of familiar vocabulary, let alone of specialised vocabulary, becomes shaken; so I found myself consulting the dictionary for 'consult', lest I had missed some archaic or specialised shade of meaning, much as I looked for the origins of 'lithium' in the Greek for 'stone' and contemplated its kinship with 'lithography' and the processes of circulating a poem, before discounting that particular shade. There are pleasures and rewards to be discovered, as well as disappointments and frustrations, in such trawlage. But is the poem offered for the pleasure of the scholar alone? For this is a different matter from exegetical attention to a poem by Milton or Keats. Before Prynne's poem, exegesis seems pushed to take effect, effect might seem available only through exegetical activity—beyond the effect of frustration, which can be mulled over, but presumably is not the only or the main effect to be derived, or why would this poet proceed again and again, and why the authority which marks these lines, the impression that they say something which ought to be said?

Their authority is a puzzling attribute, by contrast with the work of poets with whom Prynne has been compared—the eschewal of authority has been a cardinal principle of postmodernist practice. This will be addressed below in a discussion of counterfactuals; sufficient here to remark that authority is connected with a consistent and recognisable syntactical or gestural repertoire—with the explicit quality of linkages. Poetic authority also requires that the poem does not make appeal to the reader by enjoining pity or sympathy, or explaining itself; or by asserting fellow feeling with a particular and envisaged readership.

A second strategy would be to assume that the first poem, rather than providing a semantic alignment for what follows, offers a circulation in little, and that to comprehend this poem's activity will provide

guidance for the activity of the sequence as a whole. 'Circulate' refers to the experience of reading a poem so lacking in handholds, a potentially interminable re-reading which acknowledges the even spread of authority, where no title, no stressed statement, provides the reader with a seeming encapsulation, point of departure or heart. The twins open and close this poem, and the reader shuttles between their emblematic appearances little the wiser, but for a growing discrepancy between the poem's self-sufficiency and the unassignable matter it contains. Here is a poem of great formal integrity, bound by skilful vowel and consonantal patterning, organised into three-line stanzas, announcing itself as complete. Surely within this text the information is to be found which will justify its authority, whether at the internal semantic level through recognisable transformative development, through external reference although the poem seems cut off almost autistically from any recognisable world, or at the level of non-semantic poetic elements which will produce in the reader an affective response?

Another procedure assumes the poem requires the light of anticipation or retrospection to yield its sense. One might limit anticipation to what is provided in this book, in its physical presentation, in its title, in its dedication, and in the epigraphs which precede the poetic text. The dedication offers the book "For Che Qian-zi and Zhou Ya-ping and for the ORIGINALS", an enigma now unlocked by publication of *Original: Chinese Language-Poetry Group*, with an afterword by Prynne.³ For the rest, inference is supplied with much material. This handsome slim pamphlet, a demonstration of what can be achieved with a xerox machine, is bound in a pale blue bearing a reticulated device reminiscent of microelectronics, and the second epigraph, "Love of semiconductors is not enough", is to such an extent in keeping as to produce an expectation that the poem-sequence will be 'about' computing. The first epigraph is more mystifying, but the discovery that it refers to counterfactuals, David Lewis being a mathematical logician interested in the logics of possible worlds, links to the book's title, overlaying or superseding a literary expectation of a relationship to Beckett's *Not I* with relocation into a logical discourse. 'You' at once conjures a speech-act, a direct address; 'Not-You' becomes monitory, implying that this poem eschews the world of speech-acts and might occur in a possible world where communication does not so depend. And this is the case with computing, in that the transaction of artificial intelligence takes place in a possible world without speech-acts. Indeed the world of artificial intelligence could be characterised as a world of 'truthfulness-by-silence', but as a world within which 'trust',

which can occur only in transactions between sentient, moral individuals, is unavailable—hence, perhaps, “love of semiconductors is not enough”. To summarise, the reader could embark on this book with the expectation that its operations occur within a possible, counterfactual world, and that this might give rise to ethical questions about human transactions and the prime requirement for successful speech-acts in trust. Will these poems occupy such a possible world *on account of* the absence of the necessary precondition of trust, will they occupy such a world *because it is the fate* of poetry to occupy such a world and trust is therefore an illegitimate expectation of poetry (and then, what is the ethical merit of poetic art?), or will they occupy such a world *by choice*, as a perverse recourse within the history of perverse recourses in twentieth-century art, raising then the question of the sustainability and ethical merit of such a choice?

These orientations bring to bear a literary and political weight of tradition. A reaction to the absence of conditions of trust within the experienced world would recall the dystopias of Beckett or Burroughs, but also those contemporary poets for whom the world of speech-acts is so far corrupted by commoditisation and the prior ownership and exploitation of all media for human communication, from words and acts of love to scientific papers, that the poet must crush, smash and conflate the verbal material to squeeze out or shake off the marks of prior ownership, releasing a lost potency of meaning.

That of the unavoidable fate of poetry recalls Laura (Riding) Jackson, and her disgust with the amorality of poetic truth, its heartless joy in the slipperiness of human communication. If it is the fate of lyric poetry to feign the intimacy of the trustworthy speech-act and invariably to break trust, at every turn exploiting the potential of language for at-least-duplicity, does not poetry actively bring about the erosion of the intimacy on which it presumes? The relative autonomy of the poetic domain then becomes deeply problematic, open to those charges levelled against the proponents of artificial intelligence as a model for human communication—both poetry and artificial intelligence would be reproached for an inadequacy linked to their totalising ambitions, slighting soul or consciousness which can develop or refine only in relationship to the trust ordained or negotiated with god or fellow human being.

That of choice would relate to the artistic strain of experimentalism, attached to popular metaphors of scientific discovery—a let’s see-what-happens procedure associated with writers such as Gertrude Stein and

the Oulipo group and remaining attractive to some British poets. But the epigraphs enjoin a moral evaluation of procedure alien to this literary tendency. The question is begged: what would it mean to lift the dependency of poetry upon speech-acts? Why on earth (or in another contingent world) should one seek to do so?

A containing theory would be tempting—but given that the matrix of theory might act as a constricting device against which such an adventure is keyed (and this is a stricture important to counterfactual theory), it would be well to try a little rough historical description of the arena, before proceeding beyond the first poem to match and test the expectations prompted by epigraphs and title.

The urge to work poetically counter to the realism and empiricism which in so much British twentieth-century verse have seemed ineluctably drawn towards positivism or sentimentality, has marked dissident British poetry since the mid twentieth century. Whereas for Surrealists and for New Apocalyptics the strategy, in broad terms, was to deploy an unhinging ecstasies (whether or not referred to some presumed collective unconscious experience) as a disruptive force within the field of agency, characteristically this was drawn back to voice as a last redoubt of authenticity, the (fictionally) unmediated presence of the suffering or jubilant body crashing into the lists. This was so even for so fastidious a writer as W.S. Graham, and the reading voices of Dylan Thomas or George Barker have a physical resonance which might embarrass a contemporary writer. Authenticity in this sense tends towards a relative weakness in syntactical linkage and a reliance on vocalised rhythmic accumulation—to be metrically paratactical rather than syntactically so; this bardic quality therefore should be distinguished from poetic authority.

The voiced and voicing body is a more socialised recourse of J.H. Prynne's early mentor, Charles Olson, whose poetic theories give a primacy to breath which was elaborated by Robert Creeley into the voice of sexual intimacy or by John Wieners towards a gay and transvestite assertiveness. There is a mile of difference between advocacies of primary *voice* and speech-acts as purposive utterance, but in both the British and American—relatively discrete—poetical developments, primary voice tended to become attached to the celebration of will, by way of the proposition that to assert primary voice in a positivist culture was in itself possible only through an exercise of tremendous will, or alternatively a privilege of madness or reckless 'substance-abuse'. Both schools of writing, no matter how sophisticated or historically (or pre-historically) scrupulous

in attention to the construction of the self, tended towards sentimental concession to simple *need* within a shrunken sphere of ownership: the more extravagant the gestures of inclusion, the more fatally determined and the thinner the writing.

The successive poetry was little more than a last twitch of the digestion, a madness painfully contrived, with only in the novels of William Burroughs displaying the intelligence to conduct their own autopsy in the 'algebra of need'. But the example of Burroughs has no whit impeded the progressive fetishisation of the body in 'progressive' writing. Indeed, it may become possible to read much late twentieth-century Western culture in terms of body wars, where the physical site is contested by the forces of commoditisation, and by counter-forces for which the body remains the site of resistance to commoditisation, celebrating sexual hedonism (which occurs *at* rather than *between*), tattooing and SM, the excretions of primary process and so forth.

A catastrophic collapse in the conditions of trust is a given in contemporary cultural commentary, and as a relatively minor side-effect faces the reader of a poem with the question: to whom is this poem addressed? The poem can never be addressed to *you*, for you never will be of that certain gender, age, 'racial' origin, education, religion, politics, sexuality, experience of this or that... which is why the poems Faber continues to publish and the *TLS* et al to print, look so unloved and solicit love so pathetically, and why poetry reviewing has reached a nadir in expressions of personal liking argued stringently as liking for a particular chocolate centre. One solution might lie in a formalism where intimate speech-acts occur in a grid of transactional analysis, such that the poetry aspires to a tricky geometry of sentiment. This requires a sustained foregrounding of the formal constraints, as in Andrew Crozier's *Duets*, to work effectively, and runs the ever-present risk of bathos.⁴ The approach Prynne adopts in *Not-You* is to go beyond formalism's reining-in, and to prevent any attribution which would permit a reading of the poem as composed of speech-acts or as modelled after a metaphor of speech-act.

This would explain the difficulty with which the first poem in *Not-You* faces the reader, whose model for reading any poem must be based in speech-acts, their ingratiating asking trust in order to deliver meaning. *Not-You*, then, but what alternative model is available? If neither trust nor reality-testing against a social and historical world assumed to be commonly accessible can be relied upon to negotiate these poems, then

what binds them together, what principle permits them to be read as anything other than an arbitrary heap of intriguing phraseology?

The computing analogy can assist here, through supplying the principle of integrity. Integrity implies a logical consistency, but in database usage is subdivided into distinct types. Historically, Prynne's writing can be seen progressively to eschew semantic integrity in favour of referential integrity. The way in which database theorists use these terms is almost Saussurean; semantic integrity involves a check on external conditions (e.g. if a car with that number plate has not entered the garage, the entry is incorrect), whereas referential integrity implies validation within the information system (so a numberplate field within a database for transfer of ownership must be consistent with a numberplate field in a database for initial use of car numbers). Thus orientated, it might prove rewarding to enter this possible world in expectation of discovering a set of relationships and of transformations which do at least hold true by analogy with relationships and transformations with which we are familiar without making direct appeal to these. Hence some of the gratifications available from reading poetry of a more familiar kind are unlikely to be available, such as the experience of being touched directly by identification with the inferred persona of the poet, or the revelatory experience of recognising a thought or sentiment held as a pre-conscious *genera* (a term usefully coined by Christopher Bolas as the positive pole from trauma). The book may offer pleasures of another sort, those of involvement in possibilities beyond or outside those affordable by corrupted and ordinary commerce, and which engage the reader strictly, rather than either demanding a prodigious labour of processing an excess of information or inviting the reader to wallow in an unearned prodigality—a hypertextual paradise in which every turn is possible and in which every possible turn is right and true. These latter textual strategies would be too recklessly ungenerous or generous, and quite beyond any possibility of trust, being analogically untrue to any recognisably human world. Rewards, therefore, may be as constrained but also given as unpredictably (although as recognisably) as in the world we inhabit.

In considering relationships and transactions recognisable in a parallel world and endeavouring to follow these, thinking is given priority over thoughts. The poem's activity could be conceived, in W.R. Bion's terms, as marked by alpha-function, that is as processing sensory impression into a dream-work which according to Bion is active during the waking day. This is prior to 'experience'. Such a conception may be

clarified if we call to mind a more conventional poetic procedure in which thoughts encapsulated as visual images (characteristically) are disposed across verse, and linked more or less explicitly as stepping-stones in a progress of thinking. Frequently in contemporary verse, linkages are implicit and left to the reader's adeptness as a verse reader to confirm within a framework supplied by a title and a declamatory concluding line. Some commentators on Prynne have read his poetry as an extreme development of such practice, whereas the linkages between elements marked rhythmically, syntactically and semantically, seem to me to be singularly explicit in Prynne: the processes of linkage attain a primacy over encapsulated thought. Imagery in its Martian parcels is notably absent in *Not-You*, and the reader tends to be carried by syntax—or to reach for a more phenomenologically-contextualised term, by gesture. This sequence of poems is apprehensible as an entity much as an individual human being is apprehensible through his or her gestural repertoire, remaining familiar even through drastic alterations in appearance; its linkages possess the inevitability and unarguable authority of dream. Such transactions might as much (or as little) lend themselves to algebraic formulation as Bion desired for psychoanalysis through the Grid he proposed for psychoanalytical notation.

Hence the knowing and not-knowing of the reader, who may find these poems both easy of acquaintance and quite incomprehensible. Hence also another effect: after putting this book aside for a month, on taking it up again the reader will be confronted with an unremembered poem—a new poem. For alpha-function is inimical to conscious memory, which relies on encapsulating storage; to return is like having learnt to ride a bicycle but then to discover a new landscape. But this is to understate, for one's own mythologising baggage as participant reconfigures to some extent the text—you may have learnt to ride a bicycle, but this one feels radically different in its gearing and proportions.

For the commentator, who cannot be content simply to pedal his own bicycle into a science-fiction parallel world, the difficulty remains acute, as evident in the tendency of commentators on Prynne either to mine local exegesis or to raise some edifice in the air above a characterisation of Prynnean procedure. These poems stretch out too far and are at the same time too densely implicated to allow of a full account of the processes and transactions which occur across and between the poems, comparable to data-sets across which referential operations are conducted, or as the results of multi-table queries enacted on the data-sets which constitute the conditions of their universe. Paradoxically,

these poems before whose publication the word 'rebarbative' had remained short of its potential, force the would-be exegete back into the position of the reader and enjoyer of poetry (the recourse of Iain Sinclair when reviewing *Her weasels wild returning* for the *LRB*).⁵ Whilst to approach these poems naively is to invite repeated slaps in the face, that goes to demonstrate how well-taught is naïveté; what is required is the contrivance of a suspension of knowledge about poetry in order to re-learn poetry through engagement with this particular sequence of poems. It remains difficult to resist seeking within the poems some justification for propositions to which an approach through title and epigraphs has given rise.

Not-You consists of twenty-eight or twenty-nine poems (depending on whether pages 18 and 19 are read as a single poem), of which the first and final suites of eight take the form of trios of triplets, and the central twelve or thirteen are formally various. The cover device might propose thirteen poems in the middle section, showing two intersecting eights amounting to thirteen. The sum of the lines of the middle suite and the sum of the lines of the two suites of eight poems with epigraphs, are equal to 149. The first eight and last eight poems reflect the totalising, parallel-world ambitions described above, with the first eight featuring a language of equivalences, matches, balances, mimicry, stabilisation and maintenance, while the final eight are rich in database language, integrated in a high lyric manner. The transition from the first eight to the middle suite is heralded by a poem containing an empty room, whose final line asks 'remember me'; and the flurry of less formally stable poems which follows is marked by hesitations, lapses, phrasal drift and break, and one poem which appears to offer a narrative overview. These finish with a beautiful poem of two quatrains which enjoins trust through intimacy of cadence. The final group of eight announces a new set of checks and an 'anti-trust recital'. The equivalence in line count between the two modes supports a hypothesis of equivalent worlds, with one world composed out of personal and faulty but affectively powerful memory, and the other constituting a system aspiring to a formal integrity in which no data is misplaced.

Such a panoptic view invites impatience; who but an obsessional student of Prynne would count the lines? The student of Prynne is likely to do so on account of earlier numerological devices, e.g. *A Night Square* with its eleven poems of eleven lines. But the book does obtrude on the reader an unusual structural determinacy; the triplet poems feel often crammed into their form, concluding with a curt sign-off phrase, and

this is not so with the central suite. Given the expectations teased out of the epigrammatic material and what the reader might infer from the concerns of the outer poems with matching and overlay, a *sense* of an implicit equivalence is liable to arise without discovery of such a contrivance. The attentive reader will recognise *Not-You* as a formally-structured *book* rather than a collection, and reflect on the propriety of that, given the book's thematics. Not a collection, and also not a sequence understood as an adventure through linear time; a reading which proceeds from establishing a foundation in the first poem and picks from stepping-stone to stepping-stone may well be frustrated. Rather than advance into the light, the reader must negotiate transactions within a system.

In discussing the first poem of this book, I found myself reaching for the term, circulation, and asking whether that poem might be regarded as a guide to the book it opens, a 'circulation in little'. The suggestion that it might encapsulate the semantic material of the book as a whole was found unreliable. But the reader's sense of circulating on the macro and micro level prompts a reconsideration; the error was to suppose that the circulation in little might be seized as introductory, as chronologically privileged.

Certainly transactions at different levels and the relationships between such sets of transactions are a preoccupation traceable throughout the first suite of poems, and for reasons of economy and reader's patience, I confine my analysis to these. From the already-explored ambiguities of the first poem, "shade over upon shade", the reader is introduced to atmospheric activity (including bird-flight), ground-level activity which is subject to attempts at marking, tagging and fixity to the lengths of "bolted to the floor"; and the cycles of diurnal activity and of physiological activity. Some of this may be traced through the succeeding seven poems; but this could be said to be no more than a dispersed imagery, and in order to demonstrate the transactional nature of the poems, they must be examined in a more particular and abstracted way—in terms of Transaction, Intention, Direction, Duration and Quantity. To appreciate their tight algebra, it is necessary to bear in mind that these are nine-line poems—every repetition, every parallelism is powerfully binding.

Poem 1: *Transaction:* in-|decision *Intention:* to thread out, to whack, to break *Direction:* ahead, over *Duration:* at femur length *Quantity:* double, twins, alternative, two

- Poem 2:** *Transaction:* promise *Intention:* to praise, to please *Direction:* inside, together *Duration:* time rate *Quantity:* fifty more, poly
- Poem 3:** *Transaction:* choose *Intention:* to observe *Direction:* end-up, in front *Duration:* to length *Quantity:* everything, more or less, nothing
- Poem 4:** *Transaction:* in decision, intent *Intention:* to reach back *Direction:* on the low side, lifting, altitude, next *Duration:* be ready *Quantity:* the amount
- Poem 5:** *Transaction:* the best we took it *Intention:* to step, beat *Direction:* front, back, beneath *Duration:* by the hour, quite slowly *Quantity:* one, one
- Poem 6:** *Transaction:* pay-out *Intention:* to play, to equal, to break *Direction:* back, rises *Duration:* next month *Quantity:* one, a bundle
- Poem 7:** *Transaction:* market *Intention:* to pitch, to pack *Direction:* turning, falling *Duration:* so soon, no more *Quantity:* too high, lesser
- Poem 8:** *Transaction:* won, bidder *Intention:* to beat, to shun *Direction:* ahead, over (c/f poem 1) *Duration:* cut-back, dying year *Quantity:* twice (c/f poem 1)

Linkages are made forceful throughout, not only by the continual employment of the form ‘to [verb]’ meaning ‘in order to’ (which gains the force of violence), but by strong, injunctive verbs and by curt statement. Abrupt and violent verbs may appear repeatedly; across the eight poems we find “cut one hand off”, “cuts to length”, “cutlack portable” and “faction cut-back”. The characteristic and much-noticed deployment of uncontextualised nouns (what twins? what cargo? what door? etc.) proposes connections made in a space we do not inhabit, a report from an exile in another universe—to my left is the door, ahead of me a cover over black swilled albumen—, except that no concession is made to the recipient, thrown back on reconstruction according to repetitions and parallelisms, and the nouns tend to be voided of any anticipation of yield through syllabic swapping, sharing and half-rhyme. The turns, the doublings-back, the sense of being propelled outward only to be flung back onto a familiar track, constitute the nearest poetic experience can approach to a big dipper ride—so Poem 8 returns recognisably to the transactions of Poem 1.

Authority or ‘coherence’ is reinforced by the poems’ sound-world, which revolves around transformations of the pair blink/back. Half rhymes and assonance are employed insistently throughout—the mark of like and non-like. Such a process of sound transposition between what might be read as significant properties, the poet’s selection from a remarkable lexicon, tends to diminish the impact of any particular term, no matter how *recherché*; and to invest with particular force the

commonplace markers of linkage—‘got’, ‘what’, ‘whose’, ‘there’, ‘this’, in the poem in question.

But the impatient reader may expostulate: what after all do these poems mean? Do these transactions amount to something sufficiently analogous to the ‘real world’, for all their sealed-off composure, which may be transformed through the act of reading into the texture of personal experience? For whilst alpha-function may not perform such an apprehension—whilst it does not pre-digest—, it is the precondition for such apprehension; it makes it possible. And they do; and furthermore, they do so within tight limits. That is to say, they will not permit the reader the creative latitude of an author with an author’s responsibility for what goes to press, an unearned prodigality; their meanings are constrained by legitimacy within the transactional sets.

The opening lines of poems 2 and 3 appear to erect a formidable barrier to interpretation, and for that reason invite close reading as a test of apprehensibility. Identification of their central transactions suggests that they will revolve around promise and choice. Poem 2 I reproduce in full, but the reader will need to obtain the book in order to follow my argument in Poem 3.

Avian protection like a court plank as
much as I do, the top-out fortunate
conversion kit to praise what follows

that rainforest, a rapid flick together
on the glass excused. Phosphor alert badges
reinforce the eye of last-touch gladness

with the time rate to please fifty more,
non-negative liquid poly he does well
at the promise line, perched snug inside.

The mightily obscure first line comes on with a declamatory assertiveness, undercut by the amusingly crummy *franglais* pun in “court plank”. But in reading Prynne it is important not to become bogged down by obstacles and over-committed to a linear unfolding. We have hypothesised that the poem will be organised around the transaction of promise, and that promise is linked to an intention to praise. How does this help? As soon as we focus on these words, “fortunate” is brought into the field, and “avian protection” starts to lose some of its obscurity—it would be legitimate within this semantic zone to think of

augury, both in the reading of birds' flight, and to think of the augury associated with the geese of the Capitol, who provided protection through their noise and were associated with a prediction regarding Rome's fate. "Top-out", a term used for the completing of a building, may assist us in bringing "court plank" within the pale; a court plank may be equipment for the builder of castles in the air.

Moving towards the end of the poem, "non-negative liquid poly" is afforded by "the promise line" allowing a smug recognition and inhabitation of any possible outcome—auguries can never be gainsaid by the turn of events. It is "non-negative" in that it cannot be disproved or falsified, but can never be positive to the extent that the prediction can be trustingly acted upon. After all, the "conversion kit" of prediction makes it possible always "to praise what follows".

The central stanza refers to the self-confirming quality of predictions of ecological disaster; the "glass" which bears "phosphor alert badges" may be television, and the allusion would appear to be to ecological documentaries. "Last-touch gladness" is always available at "the promise line" in the calm contemplation of promised calamity enjoyed by the viewer. The "time rate" set on such disaster will confirm and please any number of TV-supper prophets. Ecological prediction is interpreted as a scientific analogue for reading birds' flight or entrails.

The poem avoids mere jeremiad through recognition that any moral statement—such as this is—arrives complete with its own promise; it courts (another shade) its own fulfilment. The "I" of "much as I do" is also reinforced by "the eye of last-touch gladness". "The rainforest", introducing the second stanza, is an instructive instance of counterfactual transaction in that it bears (with an explicitness unusual in Prynne) upon the postmodern contention that the reality available to the contemporary viewer, listener and computer jock is 'virtual'. A rainforest is as much to hand and as amenable to direct gesture in the suburban sitting-room (*that* rainforest) as for any rainforest denizen. More so indeed, since the signifier 'rainforest' with its halo of meaning for Western ecology would be more or less meaningless to the rainforest's inhabitants. But there is an important distinction to be made, in that Prynne has always been a stringently moral writer—precisely that aspect of his poetry which broadly post-modern accounts have remained blind to, symptomatically enough; the availability of "that rainforest", the virtuality of 'our' world, poses a real problem in its easy sense of responsibility for others' lives and needs (or a relativistic irresponsibility, which comes to much the same thing). The hedonistic surfing of

signifiers typical of self-consciously postmodern poetry, is absolutely to be distinguished from Prynne's concerns and poetic procedures; when Iain Sinclair in *Radon Daughters* described his Prynne-figure Simon Undark as 'the conscience of England' he is closer to the mark than any previous published interpreter of Prynne.⁶ "What follows" televisually and is confused through a "rapid flick together" in anticipation of the "announcer" in Poem 3, relegates "that rainforest" to its place in the programme, but does not absolve the viewer (and certainly not the producer) from responsibility for his or her response even if it to some extent determines it. The insane pluralism of choice is accompanied by the Cultural Studies lecturer's assertion that they had no choice at all—and although experientially true, this cannot be allowed to become normative.

Poem 3 shifts from the transaction of promise to the transaction of Choose, offering an account of a recognisable modern dilemma frequently addressed in Prynne's earlier writing: how to articulate an ethics of choice amidst endless promise, where the menu is offered for consumption ahead of the meal? The obscure "foaming metal" which opens the poem may now be connected with "phosphor alert"; the "hatch" from which we are fed and in front of which "this" (whatever is on now) may be observed, is television. "Our confidence is end-up like a roller towel" is a characteristically Prynnean witticism which tends to make exposition sound laboured—but in a roller towel the end goes up to be recirculated, and fresh confidence, fresh promise are guaranteed.

The choices offered by the channels do "titillate to the contrary" and any choice is haunted by the co-presence of brands as urgently attractive (perhaps a tilt at the complicity of rampant deconstructionism in the provision of ever more choice—'presence' hardly requires to be subverted); but there is a marked and continuing reflexivity in these lines. "Moralising" is to be distinguished conceptually from moral choice, but how is the morality of choice to be exercised when any purchase entails the consumer in a chain of unreckonable antecedents and consequences—and morality disconnected from the act of choice becomes merely 'moralising' as in any documentary's indignation? It is hard to miss the point in the line "blandly the announcer cuts to length"; after all, the indicative nature of statement in these poems which are manifestly 'cut to length' makes their author, as we have argued, a link-man extraordinary. It is this sardony which connects *Not-You* with the earlier poem-sequence *Down where changed* even if *Not-You* eschews that book's savage self-arraignment and baffled stutters. The

‘we’ of “we’ll roam the proving ground and choose” is therefore apt; as ever, Prynne uses the first person plural with fullest acknowledgment.

When promiscuous promise attends choice, choice must be vindicated, and if that is so, “nothing counts more or less furtively”—“furtively” because no moralised huffing and puffing can discount, although it may disguise, both the inconsequentiality of choice and its consequences; it counts more as it counts less, for even choice at the armaments fair and a visit to the proving ground will light upon one shining missile, spoil for choice. Whatever the effects of “lithium grease”, precisely reckoned time which slides, blurs, and overlaps and erases accountability for actions, it is incumbent on us, urgently so, to weigh “the dipper cargo” in the interests of “just bearing”, *Not-You*’s concluding phrase. *Not-You* indeed, for you will be offered absolution and every choice will have been right at the time.

But the fallibility and hesitancy of memory render it equally untrustworthy (nationalism as opposed to the digital global village), and its “coming and going” tend to be governed by calculated or unconscious self-interest. In the central section of *Not-You*, the poems tellingly feel their way by contrast with the clipped stanzas before and after, and the recurrence of ‘delay’, ‘shade’ and ‘recall’, would seem to afford a “provision beyond the fixed mark of | break-out liable detachment.” As readers we are brought to recall the monitory consultation of the heraldic twins of the first poem, for whom “shade over upon shade” was but a retread, the nostalgia and myth-making of “alternative danny boy in-|decision” giving way to the pleasures of the proving ground. To come down on one side would be the most arbitrary moralising. *Not-You* is marked by a restless dialectic between the algebraic logic of counterfactuals and the broken articulation of ‘human value’, whose tentative and beautiful synthesis in the book’s final poem it must be left to the reader of this article to encounter.

The question asked in beginning this approach to *Not-You*—a book which had appeared in both large and short measure as ‘impossible’ as a book of poetry might be—, may sound less like the rhetorical flourishes now conventional in introducing a discussion of Prynne, and more open to answer through such an account of reading the first suite of poems, and Poems 2 and 3 in particular. Familiarity with the specialised languages often deployed is not a prerequisite for understanding; recognition of the chief transactions governing the poem tends to define a semantic range which governs some of the more opaque vocabulary, and the verse’s foregrounding of linkages consonant with the governing

transaction, bound strongly by tight sound-patterning, is more constitutive of the meaning-universe of the book than any privileged encapsulation in imagery or appeal to common experience. Indeed, the poems show more wit—which is a transactional effect—than sentiment. Close reading has shown that the reader's work is rewarded by the emergence of a powerful moral account of transaction; the necessity for such work—which can be regarded in Bion's terms as a process of conception made possible for the reader by the alpha-function of the poems—, and its implication of the reader and the author, means that the reader is spared both moralising documentary and the easy recognitions and presumptuous kinship delivered through false intimacy. It has been demonstrated that to lift the dependency of poetry upon speech-acts and to strive for a poetry of internal consistency, avoiding direct appeal to a common landscape or a sociological constituency, does not result in autism or a more histrionic detachment. And Prynne's writing has been distinguished sharply from a range of contemporary poetic practices with which previously it has been compared.

Down where changed had appeared to this reader to herald a recourse to 'Truthfulness-by-silence' as the epigraph to *Not-You* has it, and as Laura (Riding) Jackson found necessary. But neither "expectation of truthfulness-by-silence" with its inference of an inaccessible counterfactual poetic world wherein poetic negotiation continues to be transacted (for such silence is a poetical decision, as Laura (Riding) Jackson's account in *The Telling* makes explicit—it is a continuation of the poetic work), nor "love of semiconductors" which allows negotiations to be conducted independently of speech-acts, can lead to trust. Prynne's courage in writing beyond the seeming impasse of *Down where changed*, was to refuse to become exemplary through silence, and to decline the formalistic temptation to devise a poetic programme and let it run (either by mechanical or evolutionary analogy). In a universe where trust is endless solicited by objects, persons and every stray phrase, Prynne has been drawn towards a counterfactual practice with its attendant formalism, but his scrupulousness, and his powerful moral conscience are not still, and enjoy a trust in his writing which is earned as by no other contemporary poetry.