Levity of Design

Levity of Design:
Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne

By

Wit Píetrzak

CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

Levity of Design:
Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne,
by Wit Píetrzak

This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4046-7, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4046-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is the result of a sudden, yet profound fascination with the poetry of J. H. Prynne. Not only has his work exerted an enormous influence over my understanding and appreciation of poetry but also has brought about changes in my perception of the task of the literary critic. There are books that we simply have to write, in order to put in writing the genuine amazement with a particular *oeuvre*, to phrase the peculiar thrall in which it has kept us; this is one of those books. Reading and rereading Prynne's poems has become a way of conversing with myself and the world as my experience of his work turned from an unnerving interest into a thrilling discovery of the unexpected.

I am truly grateful to J. H. Prynne for the illuminating conversations and insightful remarks about my work; without his advice the present study would surely have faltered. I would like to thank Dr Rod Mengham for his assistance and enthusiasm for what then appeared more of an impression of a study than a real plan. I am also much indebted to Professor Jerzy Jarniewicz for his unflagging support of my many projects as well as help and counsel when it was most needed. I am most thankful to the Dean of the Faculty of Philology, University of Łódź, Professor Piotr Stalmaszczyk for his advice and aid. Some of the ideas in this book are the result of a serious engagement with the issues of poetry and subjectivity which I fruitfully discussed with Professor Agata Bielik-Robson and Dr Kacper Bartczak, to whom I express my deep thanks. Finally, I wish to thank Professor Andrew Tomlinson for his invaluable support with the final drafts of the present book. Most of all I owe a great deal to my wife, Paulina, for propping me up, and to my son, Tadeusz, for reminding me why we read poetry in the first place.

Wit Pietrzak
Łódź, Poland

INTRODUCTION

J. H. PRYNNE, AVANT-GARDE AND NEO-MODERNISM

Let me begin with making a multiple acknowledgement: "In an article in *The Times*, 3 December 1987, the novelist, biographer and critic Peter Ackroyd described J. H. Prynne as 'without doubt the most formidable and accomplished poet in England today, a writer who has single-handedly changed the vocabulary of expression.'"[1] With this praise N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge open their study of Prynne's poetry. Seventeen years after the publication of *Nearly too Much* and almost twenty-five years since Ackroyd extolled Prynne as the major (if not the crucial) English poet, his work has still not achieved the wide acclaim that it deserves. Neil Corcoran concedes that the increasing opaqueness of Prynne's work after *Brass* may well relegate his poetry to "the kind of neo-Modern hermetic impasse to which traditional English humanists and empiricists have traditionally consigned the works of the British neo-Modern."[2] Therefore Corcoran suggests that, should no dedicated team of explicators come to expound on his work, Prynne may appear merely as a provincial neo-modernist in the wake of such poets as Pound and Charles Olson.

In the following study I try to read the Prynnean *oeuvre* (as it stands in the latest *Poems* [2005][3]) as perhaps the single most important voice in the poetic discussion on late-modern subjectivity. It is here argued that his poems, which with time undergo radical changes of technique, voice and focus, seek a language capable of expressing an individual self untrammelled by the various discourses of late modernity; the difficulty of the task lies in the fact that it is the very discourses, which Prynne seeks in his own way to overcome, that comprise the subject's being in the world. Thus, as I hope to show, the ostensible arcaneness of his art derives from the fact that

---

[1] N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly too Much. The Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), vii.

[2] Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (New York: Longman, 1993), 177.

[3] J. H. Prynne, *Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005). All the quotations from Prynne come from this edition.

his poems face up to what he sees as the predicaments of late modernity; rather than celebrating what freedom and good this era brings to the Western world, he critically regards those areas wherein the period, subtly and indirectly, works against the values which it made a point of defending in the first place.

The idea of discursive entanglement, taken to be the background for the poems analysed here, is explored in Chapter One, then re-approached throughout Prynne's work. I place the poet in a two-fold context of philosophical investigations of Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno. Even though they are not the only thinkers alluded to, it is between the poles of Heidegger and Adorno's thought on art that Prynne pursues the restitution of the self. In Chapter Two, the return of the subject elaborated in Chapter One, is identified in Prynne's work from *Kitchen Poems* (1968) to *Down where Changed* (1979); here the notion of idioms-as-manacles is further developed as the vehicle of what is termed ossification of the self (I define this term with regard to Heidegger's idea of enframing in Chapter One). Chapter Three delves into the more recent work, dating from *The Oval Window* (1983) all the way to *Biting the Air* (2003). I analyse the gradual change in Prynne's poetics from a Heideggerian premise to a more Adornian negative dialectic. The transition is by no means a severance from the earlier pursuits but rather a continuation of a direction already implicit in the first volumes. The last chapter offers a sustained reading of *Blue Slides at Rest* that closes the 2005 *Poems*. This investigation of the sequence is both a summary of the discussions undertaken in the previous parts of this study and a delineation of the idea of restituted subjectivity.

The quest for extirpation of the subject is here considered to be a prime example of the crisis within late modernity. The emancipatory idea of the death of man (whose significance is more widely presented in Chapter One) has paved the way for a number of interesting poetic enunciations for example, the earlier Ashbery and the Language group poets, but at the same time it has spurred an artistic and largely critical revaluation of the category of the self (I would tentatively mention the poets who share an affinity with Prynne: Andrew Duncan, Rod Mengham, Peter Riley and John Wilkinson, although their engagement with the idea of the subject needs much more exploration). The demarcation between discarding the subject and attempting to reclaim it seems partly dictated by the uneasy position of the idea of avant-garde's relation to modernism and postmodernism.

A key voice in discussions of the idea of avant-gardism, Andreas Huyssen says that the historical avant-garde "no longer offers solutions for major sectors of contemporary culture, which would reject the avant-

garde's universalizing and totalizing gesture as much as its ambiguous espousal of technology and modernization."[4] He openly identifies early twentieth century avant-gardist art with a ruse for discovering a depth at which the disharmonious reality would find its reorganizing principle. No doubt that principle undergirds such oft-quoted High Modernist works as *The Cantos* or *The Waste Land*. Huyssen also maintains that in spite of "the power and integrity of its attacks against traditional bourgeois culture and against the deprivations of capitalism, there are moments in the historical avant-garde which show how deeply avant-gardism itself is implicated in the Western tradition of growth and progress."[5] Huyssen enumerates a list of points of convergence between the avant-garde and capitalism, and sees the 1960s as the final collapse of modernist avant-gardism, which died along with the various countercultural movements.[6] As opposed to the modernist yearning after totality, postmodernism offers a respite from grand narratives and focuses on the surfaces of reality[7]. Thus in Huyssen's view, whereas the avant-garde ceased to exist because it aligned itself too tightly with totalising projects of modernity, as a result falling prey to twentieth century regimes, the new wave (1970s and beyond) of artists gave up their yearnings for unification and celebrated the contingent, the single and the marginal.

Huyssen's description of modernism as an avant-garde project focuses on the features that developed in the late 1910s and early 1920s, when Eliot, Pound, Yeats, Joyce, Gertrude Stein, W. C. Williams and Wallace Stevens published or began publishing their best-known and most typically High-Modernist work. From this vantage point, the avant-garde does seem a lost project. As opposed to Huyssen, Marjorie Perloff lays the stresses in different places and the image of the modernist literary avant-garde that she presents appears to still be very much present in the contemporary writing. In lieu of once more reverently paying obeisance to High Modernist literary achievements, she identifies the first fifteen years of the twentieth century as the point at which there appeared a poetic revolution which was later to be repressed; "what strikes us when we reread the poetries of the early twentieth century," she observes, "is that the real fate of first-stage modernism was one of deferral, its radical and

[4] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 175.
[5] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 173,
[6] Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, 168.
[7] Its rather long history notwithstanding, Ihab Hassan's schematic comparison of modernism with postmodernism remains a most lucid (if a little strained) delineation, which pertains to the distinction I am making here. *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 84 – 92.

utopian aspirations being cut off by the catastrophe, first of the Great War, and then of the series of crises produced by the two great totalitarianisms that dominated the first half of the century and culminated in World War II and the subsequent Cold War."[8] The radicalism of what she terms early modernism mainly consisted in formal experiment. She argues that its innovations brought to the fore the self-referential linguistic nature of poetic expression, and that idea still informs the poetics of such contemporary American poets as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian and Steve McCaffery. Although she exclusively draws parallels between early modern poetries and the new American scene, it also seems that those same strategies have underpinned the work of avant-garde British poets for the last fifty years.

Perloff identifies four principal "influences" on the current (mostly American) poetry: Eliot (until more or less the publication of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp and Velimir Khlebnikov. However, the key points of continuity between the formal radicalism of the early tradition and the art of Prynne and other British revolutionaries appears to be Eliot and Khlebnikov.[9] Eliot's breakthrough poem in Perloff's view is "The Love Song of J. Afred Prufrock" in that it most thoroughly epitomises the characteristics of the early modernist revolution in poetic language.

> [T]he imagination continues to be startled by the sheer inventiveness of [Eliot's] early poems, in which metonymy, pun, paragram, and the semantic possibilities of sound structure are exploited to create verbal artifacts, characterized by a curious mix of immediacy and complexity, of colloquial idiom and found text in the form of foreign borrowings. Not linearity or consistency of speaking voice or spatial realism, but a force-field of resonating words – this is the key to Eliot's early poetic.[10]

Perloff corroborates her list of innovative features by closely reading "Prufrock" so as to show its thoroughly modern aura of experiment that does not aspire to complete pronouncement of some pre-existent order. Indeed, very similar mechanisms that are indicated as constitutive of

---

[8] Marjorie Perloff, *21st Century Modernism. The "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 3.

[9] Among the direct influences on Prynne (though not only) one must mention Ed Dorn and Charles Olson; nonetheless, as it seems, the revolution Perloff observes in the writing of those early modernists underlies many of the experiments that he carries out throughout his *oeuvre*. For the analysis of Prynne's affinity with Olson see Anthony Mellors, "Literal Myth in Olson and Prynne," *fragmente* 4 (1991).

[10] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 41.

Eliot's early phase are embodied in Prynne's poems with equal success. As it is argued below, Prynne also deliberately intensifies the figurative processes inherent in words (even those seemingly having specialised meanings only). Also, the tension that Perloff notes between immediacy of expression and textual complexity informs Prynnean poems, which at the same time evoke meanings, sets of images kaleidoscopically glimmering against the mind's eye while deferring the moment of complete (or even more sustained) understanding.

It is these mechanisms that create an air of strangeness about the poem and radically shatter the stability of the language; as Perloff maintains, "'counterpointed pronouns' […] the abrupt tense and mood shifts, the juxtapositions of ordinary speech rhythms with passages in foreign languages, and especially the foregrounding of sounds and silences (represented by the poem's visual layout), relate 'Prufrock' to Constructivist notions of 'laying bare the device,' of using material form – in this case, language – as an active compositional agent, impelling the reader to participate in the process of construction."[11] The tensions in such poems as "Prufrock" force the reader to make "the text cohere," although it is a misleading coherence because whenever a particular lyric is reread, a slightly new meaning arises. In this respect, Perloff makes early modernism a path-breaking moment for one of the main postmodernist (in Hassan's distinction) developments: that of a transition from a "readerly" work to a "writerly" text. Therefore, in Perloff's view, contrary to Huyssen's thesis that the modernist avant-garde passed away for good, the experimentalism of the early twentieth century is still alive and well.

The other key "modernist," whose techniques may be traced in Prynne, is Khlebnikov. He operates at the level of a single phoneme; where Eliot exemplifies the technique of intensifying figurative play between words and phrases, which results in the invocation of sometimes irreconcilably discordant images, Khlebnikov's lyric is "an exercise in verbal incantation – a study of the power a single neologism can have to arouse sonic, visual, and semantic references. *Zaum* [beyondsense], in this context, far from being 'nonsense' is more accurately super-sense – what Pound meant when he said that poetry is 'language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.'"[12] Khlebnikov's lyrics do not deal in polysemy, showing from inside themselves a variety of interpretive paths pointing in different directions, but gather meanings about themselves. They spur signification by forcing one to supply one's own reading of a single sound. This radical shift of sense-making patterns pulls down not only traditional reading

[11] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 26.
[12] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 126.

mechanisms but also requires that one think differently insomuch as Khlebnikov's poems begin at a level that no other discourse can penetrate; yet, they do not relinquish language altogether but rather demand that it be considered a game in which no rules have been set.

Khlebnikov predates Wittgenstein in calling all language activity a game. "Once poetry is accepted as the language-game which makes things strange, which invents new words on the analogy with familiar ones and puts familiar words in new contexts, creating complex sound structures, the reader (or listener) instinctively plays along."[13] Thus poetry creates new games and makes the strange familiar. According to Perloff, in this sense, Khlebnikov paves the way to, among others, the Language group poets. But in hindsight, there is certain seriousness and devotion to Khlebnikov's experiment. The Soviet regime tried to extirpate futurist techniques such as Khlebnikov's because they appeared to destabilise the foundations of ideology. The apparatchiks needed a language absolutely subservient to the needs of the state. This historical context hints at a more dialectical nature of Khlebnikov's *zaum* poetry in the sense that the further his lyrics depart from commonly accepted patterns of reading and thinking, the more they unveil every single ideology as a product of linguistic totalitarianism.

In order to be able to read Khlebnikov, one must be willing to participate in the process of meaning constitution. Such reader-engagement can also be learnt from the early Eliot. Between these two poles, Eliot and Khlebnikov, it appears that the British poetic revival founded its radical avant-garde neo-modernist poetics. If, following Perloff, attention is directed to means of expression and formalist innovations, the British revivalists show much affinity with, for example, the Language poets.[14] However, in terms of the goals that Prynne and others set themselves, it appears that they distance themselves significantly from postmodern writers; in lieu of extolling freedom and the slow eradication of grand narratives, the British avant-garde poets are keenly aware of the great amount of critical work still needing to be done. If there still exists a self in their work, and in Prynne's poetry in particular, it needs to struggle with

[13] Perloff, *21st Century Modernism*, 142.

[14] David Punter also maintains that the extraordinariness of Prynne's experiment has in a large measure "to do with the postmodern." He proceeds to elaborate on Prynne's affinity with a variety of postmodern theoreticians and critics. Persuasive and lucid though he is throughout his essay, it appears that a certain (critical) commitment to the tasks of art makes Prynne's poetry in many respects irreconcilable with the writings which Punter mentions. I shall severally return to this point. "Interlocating J. H. Prynne," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31 (2002).

the various attempts by (discursive) modernity to subjugate it to the unrestrained force of language (an idea amplified in Chapter One). Formal innovation, which stems as much from the early modernist project as it does from the association with such American late modernist figures as Olson and Dorn, and an unflagging preoccupation with the individual in an implicitly hostile late modern environment, are the fundamentals of the British Revival poetics with Prynne being a salient example.

It was Tina Morris and Dave Cunliffe who first employed the term British Poetry Revival around 1965 in an underground magazine *Poetmeat*. The term referred to the poets who wrote in reaction to the "commonsense politeness of the 'Movement.'"[15] Indeed, the 1960s through to the 1970s saw an explosion of avant-garde poetic activity in Britain, which was largely influenced by American poets, including Olson, Dorn and Ginsberg. The new British poets gathered around small presses, which became the most important platform both for publishing new work and exchanging opinions on the contemporary writing scene. In a way the situation of this avant-garde began to resemble that of the earlier twentieth century modernist writers who also relied on the support of little magazines. However, the affluence and the resultant circulation of *The Egoist* or *The Little Review* far surpassed that of *Grosseteste Review* or *The English Intelligencer*, but it was the latter two magazines that presented the work of, amongst others, those who would later come to be known as the Cambridge poets. *Grossteste*, which was to be longer-lived than *The English Intelligencer*, "began to define a style more academic and austere." Centred on Prynne's Cambridge, it gathered such figures as Tom Raworth, John James, Douglas Oliver and Veronica Forrest-Thomson, who "fused lyrical precision and speculative abstraction into a new objectivism, open simultaneously to the inherited patterns of the English line and a range of globally imported alternatives."[16]

A conscious association with the modernist avant-garde of the period before World War II has gone hand in hand with a rejection of postmodernism's vision of the immateriality of the world. What Drew Milne calls late modernism is less concerned with the transcendence of

[15] Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying. British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950 – 2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 35 – 38.
[16] C. D. Blanton, "Transatlantic Currents," in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, ed. C. D. Blanton and Nigel Alderman (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 150.

High Modernist principles than with their critical renewal.[17] The British Revival poets, even though they share many formal features with so-called postmodern writers, seem to display a prejudice against too willing a support of the textualist perception of the world. They subscribe to Berman's recognition of modernism "as a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world [...] Our most creative constructions are bound to turn into prisons and whited sepulchres that we, or our children, will have to escape or transform if life is to go on."[18] It is this transformation that lies at the core of the idea of critical renewal, which takes the form of dialectic engagement with material reality and the forces that shape it. I will try to demonstrate that those forces take the form of various discourses that create a world where the self is only needed as a tool and not a (linguistically) conscious subjectivity. The idea of discursive reality is derived principally from Baudrillard, and the mechanism of eradication of the subject is analysed following de Man's postulate of the empowerment of language. Between these two thinkers the self becomes a mere cog in the machinery of late modern reality (as is shown is greater detail in Chapter One); thus human subjectivity becomes available only through an act of renewal or, as it is referred to as in the present study, restitution.

A view of the Revivalist late modernist or neo-modernist critical strategies that most pertinently expresses the working premise of this book is offered by Milne, who argues that recent developments in poetry might best be understood as negative dialectic, "the working through of innovation fatigue."[19] Since no direct access to reality is available and no clear truth is to be gleaned from language, poetry has only the path of overcoming the existent stasis that contemporaneity has wrought. This overcoming in the case of the Revivalists in general and Prynne in particular takes the form of (Adornian, as it will be argued) dialectic approach to the world of late modernity. In light of the fact that he cannot penetrate to the nature of things with his imagination, nor rely on language as a stable medium to relay his message, the modern-day poet, if he is not to abandon himself to and celebrate the contemporary hyperreality, is left with the dialectic method; he needs to strive beyond the ossified languages that surround him.

---

[17] Drew Milne, "Neo-Modernism and Avant-Garde Orientations," in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, ed. C. D. Blanton and Nigel Alderman (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 161 – 162.

[18] Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (London: Penguin, 1988), 6.

[19] Milne, "Neo-Modernism," 166.

Prynne's radical innovations (and those of Roy Fisher, John Wilkinson, Drew Milne, Rod Mengham and many other late modernist poets), which sometimes seem to preclude understanding and, as Corcoran feared, make him a poet for a narrow clique of pundits, are here explored with a view to demonstrating that only through such experiments can the idiom be renewed. Prynne appears to realise that by bringing language to the brink of signification and iterability, beyond which no communication is possible (indeed, where there is *no language*), he attains a tension within his poems that infuses words with a new life. Paradoxically enough, the less intelligible his poems are, the more meanings they accrue and the more incisively they penetrate into reality.

It would be most difficult to argue that there are overarching motifs in Prynne, for his poetry deals with such disparate material that one feels overwhelmed going from one stanza to another. Yet the theme of the self's entanglement in its world, with various connotations as well as in different modes and degrees of prominence, appears to run through his entire *oeuvre*. The volumes discussed here span thirty-five years of writing and in each one the figure of the human subject undergoes a metamorphosis. However, one element, as I maintain throughout this study, remains constant: the notion of man is neither to be dismissed as a remnant of the Cartesian past, nor regarded as self-fulfilled in the freedom which late modernity has apparently brought; man needs to be re-valuated and renewed and this, Prynne's poems come to suggest, can only be attained through a restitution of the language. The subject in Prynne is never taken for granted. The less it seems to be present in the poems, the fiercer the struggle for its existence is put up; in what follows, it is those moments of strife for the emancipation of the self that are and investigated.

CHAPTER ONE

SUBJECTIVITY UNDER SIEGE

In his seminal work *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Frederic Jameson said that Munch's "The Scream" is "a canonical expression of the great modernist thematic of alienation, anomie, solitude and social fragmentation and isolation, a virtually programmatic emblem of what used to be called the age of anxiety."[1] Irrespective of how Jameson views the condition of early-twentieth century consciousness in comparison to what he terms postmodernism[2], his words to a large degree apply to the current historical moment. In our hyperrealist, capitalism-dominated world, we become cogs in a machine whose purpose we increasingly fail to comprehend. We grow ostracised from one another and tend to stay within highly segregated social milieus even though there is no denying our freedom to socialise with people from other tiers of society. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* is a perfect example of the trauma of late modernity perspicaciously encapsulated by Munch's painting; fear, apathy and ubiquitous perils evoke the climate which "the men of 1914" could only vaguely, if most pertinently, anticipate, since it is only with the arrival of capitalist late modernity that the human subject's independence was finally taken away.

At first, trumpeted as the shedding of the chains that limited the free play of interpretation (in all fields of human activity), the death of the subject soon gave rise to the realisation that it is no longer history that

---

[1] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 62.

[2] Anthony Easthope pithily explains that "To [Jameson] 'the alienation of the subject,' enforced by modernism, is displaced in postmodern culture by 'the fragmentation of the subject;' there is no affect, no depth, because there is 'no longer a self present.'" "Postmodernism and Critical and Cultural Theory," in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim (London: Routledge, 2001), 22 – 23. What Jameson does, it seems, is an implicit validation of the modernist anxiety in that alienation is still very much present in his version of postmodernism with the proviso that the self is now alienated not from its environment but from itself to the effect that it melts into a flurry of elements.

needs to be regarded as "a panorama of futility;" the idea of subjectivity itself had been rendered obsolete. "We" continue to ponder the consequences of this all-too-hasty annihilation but no ascertainable "we" can readily be accepted. In this respect, the present may be taken to have successfully instantiated the modernist desire to destabilise the human subject. A variety of modernist techniques and groundbreaking inventions in style and literary technique look for a means to (dis)locate the subject within the world. However, this task is fraught with far greater difficulty now than it was in the first decades of the twentieth century; the present reality is constituted by the discourses of economics, politics and everyday social practice in such a way that man is left at a complete loss to see himself as part of a finite and stable environment.

The self is caught in the rhizome of its world, a labyrinth of intertwining fictions. This condition is evoked in an iconic passage from Baudrillard: "The transition from signs which dissimulate something to signs which dissimulate that there is nothing marks the decisive turning point. The first implies a theology of truth and secrecy [...] The second inaugurates an age of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer any God to recognise his own, nor any last judgement to separate true from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance."[3] The starting premise of this transition may still be located in the High Modernist yearnings for unravelling or staging a deeper sense of things; myth, depth psychology or the stabilising idea of tradition all served the purpose of asserting order against the tides of chaos. As Astradur Eysteinsson asserts, "Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a "fallen" world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality."[4] From a point where there were (often semi-divine) mediating powers (for Yeats, for instance, those were the voices that dictated the automatic script to his wife) that ensured the existence of truth and facts, the path has led to a world of living dead where there seemingly are no certainties. This is the world of hermeneutic powerplay inasmuch as only from a series of interpretations (of interpretations) can anything close to a fact accrue, although this is necessarily only a mock fact because "*it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real*, or to prove the real."[5] The textual world is Eco's city of robots, with the difference that the robots are replaced by

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e) Inc., 1983), 12.
[4] Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 9.
[5] Baudrillard, *Simulations*, 41. Emphasis in original.

shifting contexts in which and against which readings of "reality" (only possible in brackets) are spun. As a result, in political terms "[s]aturation coverage in the mass media has the effect, not of creating a better-informed electorate, but of reducing the whole business to a dead level of mindless slogans, trivialised issues and a near-total absence of genuine debate on substantive policy issues."[6] This observation by Christopher Norris may be transposed onto a discussion of the modern subjectivity. The world that Baudrillard diagnoses, and Norris to some extent endorses this premise, is covered over with various discourses that overshadow such old-standing ideas as truth and independent, self-aware subjectivity.

Under such circumstances the human subject appears to dissolve into a depthless texture of collaged pieces of clichéd discourse; the blurred image of man's consciousness is the all-too-frequent lot of contemporary times. Yet the subject, as J. H. Prynne's poetry seems to repeatedly demonstrate, is not to be expunged so lightly. However, before Prynne's poetry can be approached, it is essential to sketch the background for the reinstatement of man in the modern world. The reinstatement, or, as it may here be called, restitution, is a syncretic notion in that it takes its cue from different aspects of (neo)Romantic philosophy and the modernist aesthetics (of Adorno in particular) to construe the self as a formation pitted against the variously put ideas of the death of the subject. In what follows I discuss the Romantic-derived strategies of affirming the ego and set them against certain recent revaluations of deconstruction; finally, I use Prynne's theory of poetic language in order to argue that poetry, in this case Prynne's, proffers idiomatic techniques in which the subject can disentangle itself from what will here be defined as (pan)textualist ossification.

The Returns of the Subject

Among works dealing with the notion of the death of the author (here understood as synonymous with man in general), Sean Burke's *The Death and Return of the Author* is the most thorough in the scope of its analyses. He begins by drawing a parallel between Nietzsche's death of God and Barthes's famous death of the author, noting that "[b]oth deaths attest to a departure of belief in authority, presence, intention, omniscience and creativity."[7] In Burke's opinion, it is Barthes, as Nietzsche's ephebe (to

[6] Christopher Norris, What's Wrong with Postmodernism. Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 171.

[7] Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 22.

employ Bloom's term, which will soon prove vital), who pursues the critique of modern subjectivity to the limits of its viability. However, Barthes makes his case against a particular type of author, who is "a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual."[8] The author who is meant here, although Barthes maintains it is a modern figure, is a re-construction of the Cartesian *Cogito*. Therefore, before he can pronounce the author dead, Barthes needs to first give flesh to this persona and, to make his quest more congruent with his other works of criticism, endow it with all the characteristics of the bourgeois. It is only when the author is demonstrated to be an entity that tyrannises both the text and its reader[9] that Barthes can passionately dispose of it.

However, Burke notes that what Barthes implies in his essay is not an ontological abyss to replace an authoritative presence but a need for a new perception of the author. Where the authorial presence cannot be abided any longer, there appears a need for the constant recreation of the author figure: "the author will return as a desire of the reader's, a spectre spirited back into existence by the critic himself."[10] Burke lays emphasis on the creative element of Barthes's essay, suggesting that the death of the author is only an assertion of its impossibility in the form of a finite construct. "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing;"[11] this "Author" is not only a dead notion but also an angel of death in that his existence necessitates the demise of freedom to interpret outside the biographical context or the Author's own pronouncements about his/her work. Thus Barthes's Author must be done away with if free man is to be born, so that nothing will need to be deciphered but "everything [may] be disentangled."[12] The notion of disentanglement is synonymous with liberation, unlike deciphering, which only promises a single hidden message. In lieu of this fully-delimited

[8] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (London: Norton, 2001), 1466.

[9] Burke observes that both theory and the literature itself had witnessed convincing disposals of the author figure prior to Barthes's announcement of 1968; Bakhtin's dialogic narrator is in no way a finite construct willing to wield authority over the text it produces but a figure that deliberately asserts the carnivalesque facet of text. Similarly, Proust (whom Barthes mentions in his essay as having successfully shed the desire for authorial credit) and Joyce create texts over which no Cartesian ego exerts power.

[10] Burke, *The Death and Return*, 30.

[11] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1469.

[12] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 1469.

meaning oppressor, Burke sees Barthes's author (now with a lower case "a") as a creature under permanent construction, and he places the French theoretician among those thinkers who have radicalised the notion of the modern self. Burke indicates that Barthes's criticism of the author-figure at the same time calls for an idea of the human subject as a discontinuous, non-finite entity whose essence is infinitely deferred.

Burke summarises his revision of the idea of the contemporary subject by drawing up a genealogy of thinkers who pave the way for what he terms new humanism:

> The work of Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger – Marx also – opens out onto a sense of the subject, of the author, which is no longer normative but disclosive[13], not timeless but rootedly historical, not an *aeterna veritas* but mutable, in process of becoming, not transcendent but immanent in its texts, its time and world. Indeed it would seem that all antihumanist discourse finally makes overture to a new form of humanism, that the rejection of the subject functions as a passageway between conceptions of subjectivity.[14]

Burke's new form of humanism represents an intellectual formation that does not abandon the notion of the subject; nor does it see the thinkers of the school of suspicion as dealing a definitive death blow to the subject, regarding the modern subjectivity as a perpetual search for itself, a ceaseless redeployment of the limits of man; it is such a subject that is poised to replace the two irreconcilable visions of either a Cartesian *Cogito* or a poststructuralist subjectless and authorless text.

Burke's "third way" of human subjectivity, the path of constant re-creation of one's self in face of the various discourses that discontinuously flow through consciousness, is arguably rooted in the Romantic conception of man resembling a work of art. "Romantics emphasised *Bildung*, as culture and creation, and insisted on the arbitrariness, artificiality and deviation of any process of *Bildung* or formation," as a result "[h]uman life, as capable of *Bildung*, is *essentially* capable of being other than any fixed *essence*."[15] This endless process of self-creation and recreation, the Romantic *Bildung*, closely corresponds to what Burke asserts is the point

[13] It is no accident that Burke uses the word so resonant with Heideggerian undertones, since the disclosive nature of the modern subject evokes the unconcealing potential of works of art. Further on in this chapter this remark will be taken up so as to show that disclosure constitutes the essential feature of the contemporary self's independence.

[14] Burke, *The Death and Return*, 114.

[15] Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2008), 48. Emphasis in original.

in later Barthes (and Foucault): what the proto poststructuralists reveal in their discrete attempts to show the unviability of authorship/subject is not the essential impossibility of there being a self that dwells in the world or, for that matter, in the text; instead they seem to present an alternative path to selfhood. In Burke's reading they stress the creative aspect of subjectivity, thereby supporting the Romantic organicist conception that by composing poetry we emulate the creative process inherent in nature itself; hence what arises is a world seen in the process of constant becoming. As Friedrich Schlegel puts it: "In all its descriptions, this poetry should describe itself, and always be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry."[16] Schlegel's point paves the way to Heidegger's path-breaking observations regarding his poet of poets, Hölderlin, whose strophes echo with the primordial call of Being that gathers men into the space of their true being in the world. Before discussing Heidegger, it is necessary to first elucidate the neo-Romantic restitution of the subject.

Where Burke leaves off, stating that the contemporary self is one that must constantly seek to recreate itself, Agata Bielik-Robson continues tracing the return of the subject. For her, the notion of *Bildung* is fundamentally important to modern subjectivity under duress. Similarly to Burke, throughout her output she unearths what has been referred to as the "third way," between "pathos of origins" and an anti-pathos of infatuation with nothingness of dissemination.[17]

In identifying the need for battling for man, Bielik-Robson acknowledges the poststructural premise of Lyotard's end of grand narratives, although she sees it as a cause for anxiety, not jubilation.

> Modernity is an epoch of growing ontological uncertainty: a lack of elementary trust in the world [seen] as a particularly unfriendly place – and for oneself as a being unaccountably condemned to the condition of thrownness, of being dependent on something impossible to trust. This is the essence of contemporary nihilism: an addiction to what "is not thought" and what resists any analysis, which does not come across as trustworthy from the point of view of European *Cogito*.[18]

---

[16] Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans, P. Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 51.

[17] David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 197.

[18] Agata Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność. Pytania o współczesną formułę duchowości* (Cracow: Universitas, 2000), 129. Since she has published mainly in Polish, all the quotations from Bielik-Robson's books are provided in my translation – W.P.

In the light of the fact that there is no metaphysical vantage point, contemporaneity is plunged into an abyss of uncertainty. Bielik-Robson traces this feeling of ontological desolation in modern philosophy, persistently unravelling a process of the annihilation of the subject. Whether it is Derrida's concept of the scene of writing, de Man's rhetoric of tropes, Heidegger's thinking of Being, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge or Lyotard's crisis of old-standing lays of human progress and liberation, the self as a space of experiential abiding in the world has slowly been falling by the wayside. What is left is a deathly nihilist joy at the ceaseless play of signifiers. Although it needs to be stressed that Derrida's deconstruction retains the idea of the subject as situated in particular contexts[19] (and thus resembles the construct elaborated in the present book), the fact remains that the ego "*in situ*" is always already traced in the moment of its dispersal into fiction, which ineluctably makes the self a function of writing[20]. It is Paul de Man, however, who most openly disavows the notion of the subject to replace it with the language of tropes.

Reading a passage from Proust's *In Search of the Lost Time*, de Man probes into the idea of autonomous creation. Like much writing in general, *Swann's Way* reveals itself to de Man as a dance to the "grammar of tropes":

> By passing from a paradigmatic structure based on substitution, such as metaphor, to a syntagmatic structure based on contingent association such as metonymy, the mechanical, repetitive aspect of grammatical forms is

[19] For Derrida's discussion of what situated subject means to him see the discussion after Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy. The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Danto (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 271.

[20] This move is best seen in Derrida's analysis of the ego in Freud wherein the philosopher unravels the self as being a product of an interplay of infinite layers of writing that constitute the scene of writing on: "we are written only as we write by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external – Derrida observes – The 'subject' of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found." "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge, 1995), 226 – 227. Although here Derrida takes issue with the classical notion of the subject, his contention is that the only subjectivity that exists is always already in a permanent state of dispersal through dissemination.

> shown to be operative in a passage that seemed at first sight to celebrate the self-willed and autonomous inventiveness of a subject.[21]

The self is not only ousted from a central position in the creative (as well as epistemological and ontological) act, as it is the case in Foucault's "What is an author?" but simply disappears; henceforth it is the "grammar of tropes" that "governs" the creative process. De Man goes on to show, this time commenting on Rilke's "Am Rande der Nacht" ("At the Borderline of the Night"), that the image of violin strings in the lyric indicates the "assimilation of the subject to space" in which the subject as autonomous disappears. This moment is manifestly positive, a "passage from darkness to light."[22] Clinging to the idea of the self is, for de Man, a terrible blindness to the fact that there is no conscious subject behind any text but only "a potential inherent in language."[23] Texts are created not by a self that organises the images into more or less coherent wholes but are constituted by the intrinsic grammar of tropes. As a result, the subject is thoroughly fictionalised and becomes a function of language. De Man expresses this idea with all clarity in his essay on Nietzsche: "By calling the subject a text, the text calls itself, to some extent, a subject."[24] The modification "to some extent" changes nothing insofar as de Man states what he has already demonstrated in his reading of Proust and Rilke; the subject does not exist, and even this postulate is no "final truth" free from tropological appropriation, since de Man merely disposes of the traditional illusion that selfhood guarantees the existence of truth. The only positive element in de Man's project is the constant deconstruction of meanings. since it is necessarily phrased by means of rhetorical devices, meaning is always infused with a subversive potential that thwarts every attempt at complete explication.

In such an essentially hostile environment of fragmented discourses floating about and resisting synthesis, Bielik-Robson locates her idea of strong subjectivity. She derives this notion from Harold Bloom's concept of the strong poet, an ephebe writer who must overcome the influence of precursory strong poets before he can become a fully-fledged poet himself. Bielik-Robson, however, takes Bloom's vision a step further and makes his strong poet a model for the construction of the contemporary subject. As in Bloom, the poet struggles with the deadening (textual) influence of

---

[21] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 16 – 17.
[22] De Man, *Allegories*, 36.
[23] De Man, *Allegories*, 37.
[24] De Man, *Allegories*, 112.

earlier strong masters, so in Bielik-Robson the subject must repel the onslaught of the forces of disseminating discourses that strive to eradicate it. "The strategy of strong subjectivity consists in a ploy against the adversary influences. The ego yields to the influences but it is a paradoxical surrender, since in this way the ego declares war on them. It does not cut itself off from them, it does not hold them "outside," quite to the contrary – it attempts to absorb them."[25] The subject thus positions itself as a formation in constant struggle with flux and foment of the textualist world. The absorption of this outside is unprecedented, since it distances itself from all philosophical stances, from hermeneutics all the way to the idealist Romantic *Bildung*. What Bielik-Robson understands by absorption is a ventriloquised and appropriated Bloomian misprision:

> Absorption is both defensive and offensive. The subject is still weak and that is why it needs to defend itself: but the defensive strategy of accepting the influence [misprision] becomes a fickle source of subjective power. The weak subject swerves[26] from the influence, making it assume a new quality and become a foundation of its own unrepeatable self. Absorbing defensively and evasively in a long process of incessant swerves and remodelling whose aim is to wipe out the alien origin of the influence – the subject itself slowly becomes its own influence. The weaker it once was, the stronger it now becomes.[27]

Bloom's poetic influences represent to Bielik-Robson the shards of fragmentary discourses that constitute contemporary reality; everything from advertisement slogans, politicians' procrastinations to widely circulated and context-devoid scientific jargons comprises this textual milieu. The subject placed inside the horizon of discontinuity must fight back against the alien in-flux that wishes to absorb and spread it to a non-existent thinness. Bielik-Robson rightly intuits the impossibility of existence in thorough resistance to the deconstructive drive of influences in that there can be no life outside the world, as Heidegger put it. All living must be done within the reality one is thrown into, which necessitates the struggle with the influences that essentially constitute this reality.

On the one hand Bielik-Robson accepts the conclusion that late modernity is defined through the irreducible notion of freeplay. Granted that "we are already, before the very least of our words, governed and

[25] Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność*, 95.
[26] Bielik-Robson deliberately uses Bloom's terms and tries to endow them with her own meaning.
[27] Bielik-Robson, *Inna nowoczesność*, 95.

paralysed by language," wherein "there is no autonomous act of signification, but a simple and endless possibility of exchange" as Foucault put it early on in his career,[28] drawing an analogy between the structuralist approach to language and the Classical theory of money – the subject becomes subservient to the forces of signification. On the other hand, and this is Bielik-Robson's long-term project, the subject need not go gently into that good night of dissemination; it may tackle the web of discourses by first absorbing them and then striving to overcome (also in the Hegelian sense of the term) them. If the former mode is dictated by the incipient realisation that meaning results from a network of linguistic practices men dabble in[29], then the latter departs from the Romantic *Bildung* and progresses through Bloom to an unprecedented vision of an embattled subject.

It is this Bloom-derived notion of strong subjectivity that can successfully and ambitiously respond to the deconstruction of the notion of the subject.[30] What matters here, however, is not the Romantic idealist transcendental self but the "I" characterised by "its awareness of influence; an awareness joining two truths – that of experience, indicating the existence of the real outside world, and that of the truth of self-knowledge that teaches the self of its singular autonomy, freedom, creative openness."[31] According to this postulate, the subject in *modernitas* is a highly ambiguous construct as it cannot assert itself with any degree of certainty but must persist in trying to absorb and conquer a morass of influences.

The strong subject is not born strong but needs to rip its strength from the claws of tradition if we follow Bloom and from deconstructive drives if we follow Bielik-Robson. It must "struggle for primacy on the sea of influences which constitute it, at the same time denying it the right to absolute originality."[32] The subject is adrift, as it were, on a vast expanse

---

[28] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 298, 179.

[29] Perhaps the best-known supporter of the claim that all truth derives solely from the language games we choose to play and cannot be reduced to any verifiable facts, phenomenal or otherwise, is Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 117 – 119. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8.

[30] At the time when this book was written Bielik-Robson's *The Saving Lie*, where she insightfully argues that Bloom's rhetoric of tropes is an answer to deconstruction, was not yet available.

[31] Agata Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni. Rewizja Romantyczna i filozofia* (Cracow: Universitas, 2004), 27 – 28.

[32] Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni*, 370.

of the ocean, where it has to muster its strength to resist waves crashing against its fragile vessel[33], threatening it with destruction. The nature of the strong subject for both Bloom and Bielik-Robson is *agon*. Bloom's ephebes in *Anxiety of Influence* are forged in the fire of conflict. The Satan of *Paradise Lost* rebels against God, thereby assuming his position as the paradigmatic belated poet; Wallace Stevens openly boasts of never having read too much poetry despite repressed traces of the poetic predecessors in his *oeuvre*[34]; Ashbery, in his turn, becomes an ephebe to Stevens, wrestling poetic prowess from the powerful hands of the Canon Aspirin.[35] The *agon*ic self in Bielik-Robson's broad sense must contend with language for its right to exist; Bloom strikes a similar note, observing in his analysis of Emerson that the philosopher's language (as well as Whitman's) knows "something about *agon*, about the struggle between adverting subject or subjectivity and the mediation that consciousness hopelessly wills language to constitute. In this *agon*, this struggle between authentic forces, neither the fiction of the subject nor the trope of language is strong enough to win a final victory."[36] The subject is always faced with the language proliferating tropes that threaten to engulf all subjectivity in a perpetual deferral. It is de Man who creates this dangerous language, stressing that the subject's autonomy is illusory, since in fact this is merely a postponement of the final dissipation in rhetorical flux.[37] Bloom invokes a vision of struggle whose point is to defer the conclusion indefinitely; thanks to such a strategy, the subject may retain its qualified freedom, and enter the strife with the bellicose language as a means to gather strength for self-preservation.

The *agon*ic self willingly enters combat with language because at stake lies its own life. Significantly enough, the prize in the struggle is no eternal life but simply the right to carry on living. Thus Bielik-Robson, by dint of the Romantic idealists, psychoanalysis, Gnostic philosophers,

---

[33] Given that both Bloom and Bielik-Robson make an ample use of the Gnostic tradition in their theories, the word "vessel" is here intended to be a remote echo of the Gnostic broken vessels, of course appropriately diminished in scope to resemble the meek human endeavour in the belated time of the present.

[34] Bloom explicitly asserts at the beginning of his most thorough treatment of Stevens that "the first stanza of 'Sunday Morning' is the true *clinamen* for Stevens, his grand, initial swerve away from origins." *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of our Climate* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 27. Among the precursors of "Sunday Morning" Bloom lists Tennyson, Wordsworth, Keats and Whitman.

[35] Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, 171.

[36] Harold Bloom, *Agon. Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 29.

[37] Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni*, 18.

contemporary deconstructivists and Harold Bloom, arrives at the notion of "the post-critical subject." She explains that such a subject

> [A]ppropriates all the techniques of suspicion[38] that have so far been implemented in deconstructing it. Therefore what, from the deconstructive point of view, weakens the position of the subject, bereft of any direct link with its experiential truth, according to Bloom appears to be a drawback turned into a merit: irony, figuration, inertia of rhetorical tropes, which in de Man and Derrida lead inadvertently to the death of subject as the epistemological centre, are here taken to be the defence mechanisms of subjectivity which does not desire the Cartesian certainty and truth but something quite different [...] a separate life.[39]

All the methods used to disavow the subject may, according to Bielik-Robson, serve the function of the subject's preservation. This approach follows a similar line to Burke's in the sense that the deconstructive mechanisms which seek to destroy subjectivity in the process of a text's emancipation may easily be harnessed to strengthen the ego. The thoroughly Romantic stance which Bielik-Robson shares with Bloom has at its foundation the Schlegelian premise of *Bildung*, even if it is soon departed from.

What Bielik-Robson proffers is vitally important for the reading that will be attempted here, for Prynne's poems stand, arguably, on the same frontline as does Bielik-Robson. With each succeeding volume Prynne tries to find a path outside the poststructural impasse, a path that can be seen more readily through the premise sketched so far. However, there is a marked difference between the position philosophers and critics of the kind Bielik-Robson and Bloom represent and the engagement displayed by Prynne. Thus far the theory of the return of subjectivity has progressed along the lines of Romantic revision but this path calls for some qualification.

Bloom carries on with his description of the *agon* of the subject with language figuration, and observes that stalemate (lest one should use the word "deadlock" which Bloom would greatly resent) is reached between what he calls "authentic forces." Yet for him such an equivocal position is not something to sulk over but rather a reason to rejoice; if neither side can win, if neither deconstruction nor Romantic revision can (or indeed must)

---

[38] The term derives from Ricoeur's notion of "the school of suspicion" which denotes Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. Merold Westphal, "Ricoeur's Hermeneutical Phenomenology of Religion," in *Reading Ricoeur*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 111.

[39] Bielik-Robson, *Duch powierzchni*, 372.