

On Violence in the Work of J.H. Prynne

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By

Matthew Hall

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To my partner and children, whose lives are my daily inspiration.
To Layla, Cohen and Pamela: for whom, by whom and with whom
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INTRODUCTION

In the epigraph to Peter Riley's pamphlet *Reader*, Jeremy Prynne delineated the foundations of a poetic project already many years in development, writing, "It has mostly been my own aspiration, for example, to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usage; and thereby with the reader's own position within this world."¹ Due to its scope, excess and complexity, Prynne's poetry problematises an experience of the world inextricably knotted with the manners in which it may be understood. Prynne's poetry and its political inclinations function in a manner which contest the need for and the function of poetry in contemporary culture. The perpetration of violence, its integration into power structures and its representation form systematic and methodological constructs by which Prynne begins to establish with the reader an awareness of this poetic and political questioning.

This book is about violence. It sets out to develop a critical methodology for the analysis of violence operative in a poetic, using contemporary philosophical arguments and poetic theory to explicate and define the correlation between instances of violence and their effects upon a poetic. This book, and its attendant investigation, brings awareness to the manner in which violence and its representation are substantiated in the poems and condition the function of the poetic. The central task is to examine the ways in which an engagement with and representation of violence is manifested in Prynne's poetry and the manner in which it performs and influences textual, poetic and ontological operations. Exploring Prynne's oeuvre through this methodology highlights the ways that violence operates in varying texts and demonstrates how this violence conditions the function of each poem and potentially limits its expression.

A methodological selection of Prynne's books was undertaken to evaluate the varying poetic functions associated with the textual construction and representation of violence. This book will function as a series of investigations that analyse the role of violence as experienced through a close reading of the texts. In most instances the occasion of

¹ Peter Riley, *Reader* (London: [n.p.], 1992): [n.p.]. J.H. Prynne's quotation, dated 15th September 1985, as epigraph, is on p. [4].

violence is represented in a manner that functions upon a number of operative axes, from the philosophical, to the ontological and the political, problematising the poet-subject relation through poetic structure, the contestation of the lyric voice and the effects of violent experiences upon poetic rendition. While the function of violence may manifest itself across any number of these positions, each instance of violence in the texts selected signifies an intentional development in the meaning and cognition of only one of these positions at any given time. As the violence at play within Prynne's poetic acts upon these axes in differing proportions, analysis of these axes will contribute to the comprehensive understanding of the role of violence across Prynne's oeuvre.

The strategy for examining violence across Prynne's oeuvre entails a metastructural analysis of the role of violence within a poetic and an exploratory inquiry into violence and its representative constructs. Each chapter couples instances of violence with a philosophical investigation on the basis of the historical paradigm of each poem under discussion. That is, the poems themselves utilise and interrogate the socio-historical and linguistic structures of a particular language history, contingent upon the events that they describe, which in turn can be revealed and understood through philosophical investigation. Strategic analysis of the codices and histories of the language used to represent violence will highlight the effects of violence on the poem at a structural level. This methodology is used to apprehend the ways in which violence delimits or otherwise alters the epistemic status of the poem. This investigation focuses on understanding the varying axes of informational exchange within each poem and accentuates a hermeneutic reading practice to highlight the effects of violence upon the poetic, as well as the ramifications of violence on the reader, poet and axes of poetic expression.

Through examination of the role of violence in transforming a poetic, this analysis explores the role of the poet in dealing with the ethical challenge of representing violence. That the representation of social forces exists at an intersection with the imaginative and creative encounter allows the reader an understanding of the social consciousness of Prynne's poetic. In these works, the representation of violence exists across the axes of poetic construction, determining the meaning of and limitations placed upon the representation of the landscape, the corporeal and the sustentive. Through the increasing integration of technology into the operations of dominance, constrictions and limitations are placed upon those subjugated, nearly eliding the capacity for subjective expression. It is from within the confines of the dominant power structure that Prynne's lexicon is drawn and poetic constructions are formed. Through, and against, these forces of

dominance, Prynne's poetics of resistance speaks. The struggle to give voice to suffering defines both the poet and his work; by providing resistance, Prynne adds to the very definition of "who we / are".²

In Prynne's writing, the representation of the landscape is always a political utterance, a literary framework that highlights issues of control, distortion and degradation. The use of the landscape to frame the discussion of historical events is a notable feature across Prynne's oeuvre, and one which must form an integral part of any examination of Prynne's poetic. The analysis of the landscape as invoking literary history and informing the poem's thematic event reinforces Prynne's conceptualisation of poetic thought "as brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language".³ The representation of the land and the connection to the pastoral form attests to the fact that the "landscape becomes acculturated by the subsistence of social memory".⁴ In this regard, the representations of landforms are acculturated by literary and social history, and frame the historic expressions of violence and hegemonic power which Prynne can evince in his works. In this manner, it is demonstrated that poetic languages as well as the representations of landforms are conditioned by the social and literary history of place, for they too reflect the very definition of "who we / are".⁵

Prynne's collections incorporate the forms and tropes of landscape usage, in which the representations create meaning from differing versions of the pastoral condition. In *Brass* (1971), this is highlighted through the embodiment of the literary and social history of the Holocaust, which informs the semantic and semiotic operations of Prynne's biographical elegy to Paul Celan, 'Es Lebe der König'. The use of the pastoral substantiates the ontological commitment of the poem, and frames the movement from grief to consolation in the elegy. The link between the landscape and bodily harm is a complex that Prynne explores in *Acrylic Tips* (2002), where Indigenous scarification bridges cultural differences

² J.H. Prynne, 'Numbers in Time of Trouble,' *Kitchen Poems* (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1968; New York: Grossman Publishers Inc., 1968): [n.p.]; *Poems* (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2015): 17-18, 17. All references to Prynne's *Poems* will cite the 2015 edition unless otherwise noted.

³ J.H. Prynne, 'Poetic Thought,' *Textual Practice*, Vol. 24 No. 4 (August 2010): 595-606, 598.

⁴ J.H. Prynne, 'A Letter to Peter Riley (14th Feb. 1967),' *The English Intelligencer*, 1st ser., 15 (Apr 1967): 284. Reprinted in Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison, Luke Roberts, eds., *Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2012): 74-78, 76.

⁵ Prynne, 'Numbers in Time of Trouble,' *Kitchen Poems*, [n.p.]; *Poems*, 17-18, 17.

between Western and Indigenous knowledge of the land. However, in 'Refuse Collection' [2004] the wound is punitive, and is represented through the inscription of the body and the land as evidence of the operation of sovereign power. Paralleling the destruction of the land, 'Refuse Collection' presents the semiotisation of the body, a convergence of corporeality and text which frames the body and the land as vehicles of signification. The representations and articulations of landscape create structures of poetic knowledge incorporative of literary antecedents and historical events, in which violence forms a component part. This incorporation influences the representation of land, its constrictions and access, and codifies its usage as signifying "the history of [the] person / as an entire condition of landscape".⁶

Since *Wound Response* (1974), conceptions of corporeality and pathological harm have been intrinsic to the development of Prynne's poetic. The expression of corporeal wounding represents a point of integration where the poetic construction incorporates physiological and pathological technical discourses. Coextensive with the corporeal construct is the integration and critique of economic systems and the language that these systems utilise, which control and direct the lives of citizens. The economic structures and discourses of the poems in *Bands Around the Throat* (1987) are unified with bodily and corporeal expression through the problematisation of labour power and the sustenance, providing a referential frame for understanding how economic systems create and reinforce conditions of subjugation and violence.

Reading expressions of corporeality in 'Refuse Collection' through Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz demonstrates that the enactment of ultra-subjective violence established an *a priori* construct on the definition of subjecthood, by which the prisoners' rights are reduced, and torturous treatment is enacted and ultimately justified under the torturers' laws. In 'Refuse Collection' the inscription of the body and the destruction of the body politic stem from an event through which subjectivity is redefined. The effect of colonial violence on the gendered condition of poetic expression and the expression of Indigenous cultural traditions in *Acrylic Tips* attest to the capacity of violence to control and limit expression. What is further highlighted in *Acrylic Tips* is the manner in which the human and animal body become abrogated through labour and the incursion of the technological. This is a deliberately limited reading of the expression of corporeality in the poems, in which bodily control, definition and

⁶ Prynne, 'First Notes on Daylight,' *The White Stones* (Lincoln: Grosseteste Press, 1969): 41; *Poems*, 69.

expression are unified with lyrical, subjective expression and inherently linked with the experience of violence.

As they relate to the condition of the corporeal, issues of the sustentive also populate Prynne's poems in numerous ways. Highlighting Prynne's usage of the sustentive in *Brass*, the natural is represented as a syntactic medium with the propensity to become negatively inflected, most notably in the transcribing and contextualising of Celan's use of these elements in representing his experiences during the Holocaust. The atrocities investigated in *Bands Around the Throat* directly negate any concept of nourishment that might be taken from the depiction of sustentive elements. The interplay between health, nourishment, technology and capital is intrinsic to the prosodic construction of the poems, and fundamental to the representations of bodily and lyrical expression. The examination of the sustentive in this analysis and its relation to the ecumenical, the corporeal and the body politic may provide orientation for further investigations.

Throughout Prynne's poetic oeuvre, music is represented and interrogated for signifying ontological sustenance. The reliance of 'Es Lebe der König' on the fugal pattern informs the technical and thematic orientation of the poem, by creating fidelity to the event of Celan's death and evincing the role of ideology in perpetuating the Holocaust's inescapable cycle of violence. As with *Brass*, the roles of censorship and classical music in *Bands Around the Throat* are unified, and through their expression represent an occlusion of suffering. For the reader, this music intones the cruel, parodic affirmation of the suffering represented in the poem. In *Bands Around the Throat* the inclusion of music is a caustic critique of the Soviet government's censorship of information, which prolonged the suffering of those exposed to radiation. The imperturbable classical music used by authorities to silence expression and knowledge of suffering stands as an ironic artefact of the graceless inadequacy of those authorities in deciding what is best for their citizenry. The influence of music in informing the poetic structure and technical operation of Prynne's poetry is one of the avenues foundational to a continued exploration of Prynne's poetic construction.

A point of continued emphasis in Prynne's poetic is the development of technology into a thematic aim, as in *Acrylic Tips*, where the incursion of technology directs and controls modes of communicative expression and the construction of poetic language. Technology functions as an expression of dominance and ideological control in warfare, communication and labour. Confederate with the operation of technological violence is the coercion of will, the contamination of language and the threat of force to which end users of technology are subjugated. *News of Warring Clans*

(1977) starkly concentrates the role of the technological in creating a unilateral expression of dominance in communication and war. Through the inequity of communications, the pressure and degradation of the semantic and semiotic operations of language are most prominently exhibited. In *News of Warring Clans* an imbalance is demonstrated through the poem's prosodic form and narrative hierarchies which eradicates the propensity towards communicative exchange. That the violence of a poem is evinced through a degraded or compromised language system reinforces Prynne's pronouncement that language is the first medium in which acts of war are staged. The constrictions on poetic language due to the incursion of the technological serve to frame and determine the lexical depth and dimension of the poem's range and potential for expression.

'Refuse Collection' represents an intersection of levels on which violence operates in times of war, from the systemic to the ultra-subjective instances of violence, and displays how evidence of this violence is understood by the public. The constitution of public language in the poem and its mimesis in poetic construction exemplify the constrictions placed upon the subjective voice. In Prynne's work, poetic construction operates with a damaged or degraded lexicon, reflective of the socio-historical contexts of the poem. Through the constrictions of the poem's "consumptive action", which imposes limitations on the capacity for subjective expression through technological and linguistic domination, Prynne initiates a new line in poetic thought. The poem forms an offering of resistance, which ensures that the images, discussions and events of violence are not forgotten. In this manner, the poem gives voice to suffering by coupling the act of creative imagination with a fidelity to the event.

The compression of discourses into a singular, integrated register shows the implications of "[h]uman language [as] the tribal continuity of expressive human behaviour".⁷ In *News of Warring Clans* this includes not only the lexicon and discourses which pervade the poem, but also the manner in which ekphrasis and meta-theatrics, as well as literary forms such as the pastoral elegy, act as both forms and tropes in the creation of poetic meaning, incorporative of language history. The exposition of violence in the collections function at political, rhetorical, pathological, socioeconomic and linguistic levels. The constrictions on language determine the lexical arrangement and operation of the poem, and

⁷ J.H. Prynne, 'A Quick Riposte to Handke's Dictum about War and Language,' *Quid*, 6 (2000): 23-26, 24.

therefore form a precursory determination in outlining Prynne's engagement with the representation of violence.

Prynne's poetic of resistance sutures the freedom of the imaginative act with a moral imperative to represent suffering in a manner that limits the exploitation of victims. His poems create an experience through language rather than a representation of the experience, and do so by utilising the limitations created and determined by the language of the dominant power structure. The violence represented enacts particular and contingent operations on the function of the poetic, to the point at which Prynne's poetic of resistance calls for a recalibration and reconstitution of the limits of expression. From this position Prynne creates a model of lyric reflective of the violence of the event, in which subjective expression and the ontological model of the poem may be preserved.

The preservation of the language of subjective expression is crucial to the relationship between violence and bearing witness, and determines the manner in which moral representations of violence and resistance are interrelated. Reading Prynne's poetic through the philosophy of Alain Badiou renders ontological resistance a function of a poetic that acts in fidelity to a violent event. Through the enactment of resistance, new poetic thought establishes the capacity to bring awareness to the forces of violence and to preserve the ontological realm. As with Celan, Prynne's poetic of resistance must bear a relation to the truth of the event, actively attesting to the power of the witness to speak from within the confines of physical and linguistic dominance. In response to acts of violence, the task of the poet is to create new poetic thought, a response of vocational urgency for Prynne in resisting systems that create and enforce dominance. By lending his voice to the subject of suffering, Prynne brings notice of his resistance to the public discourse through the creation of new poetic thought.

CHAPTER ONE

‘ES LEBE DER KÖNIG’

In 1966 Prynne stated the necessity for poetry was to “emphatically reclaim the power of knowledge for each and any of us in our common answerability as the creatures of language.”¹ The demands that Prynne placed on his readers through *Kitchen Poems* (1968) and *The White Stones* (1969) reach a point of crescendo with *Brass* in 1971. Paralleling a level of difficulty that Prynne found in Douglas Oliver’s *The Harmless Building*, Prynne aimed to create a poem in which “the ethical vector is violent and discontinuous, developing schizophrenia of the body-precept and [forcing] the embedding of the will within larger spiritual bodies, but also revealing moments of absolute truth.”² Instead of enlarging the histories of representation in *Brass*, Prynne returns to the questions and discourses of his previous collections.

As Prynne suggests, *Brass* is the moment at which “the question / returned upon itself”; a path of reclamation from a state of being where “the devastation is aimless”.³ The engagements and enactments of language utilised in *Brass* function as mechanisms of self- and social-recognition within the postwar period of European history. To approach *Brass* one must do so from a position of re-engagement with the contextual contiguities that follow from *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*. *Brass* recasts authorial presence as disproportionately exiled in relation to the previous ontological position held. In this manner Prynne

¹ Keston Sutherland, ‘Hilarious absolute daybreak,’ *Glossator: Theory and Practice of the Commentary*, 2 (2010): 115-48, 117. Quotation amended for clarity.

² J.H. Prynne, ‘From a Letter to Douglas Oliver (9th January 1972),’ *Grosseteste Review*, 6.1-4 (1973): 152-54, 152.

³ Prynne, ‘Crown,’ *The White Stones*, 86-87, 87; *Poems*, 116-17, 117. ‘A Stone Called Nothing,’ *The White Stones*, 90-91, 90; *Poems*, 120-21, 120. In this chapter quotations from *Brass* (London: Ferry Press, 1971) will be cited by their page numbers in parenthesis (pagination in the original publication of *Brass* [1971], 9-41, followed by pagination in *Poems* [2015], 150-79), with the exception of ‘Es Lebe der König’ (*Brass*, 31-32; *Poems*, 169-70), as quotations from that two-page poem are referenced instead by stanza, followed by pagination in *Poems*.

turns upon his own prior propositions and reinserts presence within the questioning framework of the poem. Sutherland notes that *Brass* “recasts the *Heinker* of fortune as paralytic transit from destiny to modern politics and it does so by evacuating lamentation rather than by universalising it”.⁴ The unifying praxis of colluding discourses in *Brass* is an engagement with threads of discourse which Prynne had previously described as “untying like a knot” due to “violence reversed”.⁵ But violence reversed is not violence forgotten, as can be seen in numerous other instances in Prynne’s oeuvre where physiological wounding has manifold implications on the subjective identities within the poem.

One of the main thematic interests of *Brass* is the concept of loss, personal and social as well as ontic and ontological. In approaching the site of this loss, it is revealed that there is always a remnant that remains intact, despite the depth of loss experienced. As in Alain Badiou’s philosophy, the collection signifies a residual knowledge that is sutured to the truth process of love, which remains through the violence of the event and is preserved by the subject’s fidelity.⁶ Badiou’s assertion can be read into the collection *Brass* and is fundamental to the poem ‘Es Lebe der König’, as love and nature’s perseverance are acts depicted as capable of withstanding the violence of the Holocaust. ‘Es Lebe der König’ is also reliant upon and connected with the pastoral elegiac form, which relates most prominently to how one reads the landscape. Fidelity and preservation are foundational to the poem, for the manner in which Celan’s death and the death of Holocaust victims affect the narrative is in the procession from loss to consolation. The landscape is invoked, principally as an evocation of the power of nature to persevere through tragedy. The descriptions of the landscape as a symbol of forbearance and sanctity replicate Celan’s poetic and reinforce Prynne’s argument that “the landscape becomes acculturated by the subsistence of social memory”.⁷

Ideas of loss, reclamation and the possibility of redemption extend to the poem a growing awareness of social conditions within the postwar British poetic movement. The “mythic vision” and the shamanic invocations referenced in *The White Stones* have taken on the tone of a “fascist invocation of art to redeem politics in a seductive vision of

⁴ Sutherland, ‘Hilarious absolute daybreak,’ 120.

⁵ Prynne, ‘A Gold Ring Called Reluctance,’ *Kitchen Poems*, [n.p.]; *Poems*, 21-23, 21.

⁶ Alain Badiou and Simon Critchley, ‘Ours is not a terrible situation,’ *Philosophy Today*, 51.3 (2007): 357-65, 361.

⁷ Prynne, ‘A Letter to Peter Riley (14th Feb. 1967),’ 284. Reprinted in *Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer*, 74-78, 76.

reparative return to the pure and whole”.⁸ For Prynne, myth may have once been seen to have the functional ability to “structure the realities of the world”, but this is evidenced no longer.⁹ In *Brass* it is of no consolation that myth holds up the modalities of being in the world if individuals can never live up to the demands placed upon them. One of the main thematic registers of *Brass* is the exhortation of the individual to face suffering and to pursue knowledge without reliance on myth or religion. Through these means Prynne reaffirms a position of a radical, eventual subjectivity. Contingent to the argument in *Brass*, Prynne asserts that the rupturing of sociological norms structures the position of new knowledge and new poetic thought. For Prynne, ontological knowledge is confined to the same potentials and limitations as poetic knowledge, as “the methods of poetic composition [...] cannot be defined or contained by its shells but must break them to become altogether new: new poetic thought”.¹⁰

In *Brass* it is the reader’s charge to march determinedly through the “waged incompleteness” (‘Es Lebe der König,’ s.4/169) of the articulations of meaning and come to an understanding of Prynne’s engagement with and subsequent refutation of the primitive mythologies of the human.¹¹ By presenting within *Brass* a position of active self-critique, Prynne works to re-authenticate the poem’s ontological questions in relation to the truth. Prynne argues that “[p]oetic thought does indeed demand the unreserved commitment of the poet, deep-down within the choices and judgements of dialectical composition; but before the work is completed, the poet must self-remove from this location, sever the links not by a ruse but in order to test finally the integrity of the results”.¹² Where Prynne calls for authorial

⁸ Patricia Waugh, *The Harvest of The Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 74.

⁹ Following on from Prynne’s *The White Stones*, the mythological process, shamanic evocation and subsequent marginalisation of the individual within the group proposed by the title ‘L’Extase de M. Poher’ (22-23/161-62) is what gives weight to the satirical tone of that work. In a 17th April 1964 letter to Charles Olson (quoted in Sutherland, ‘Hilarious absolute daybreak,’ 131), Prynne writes that he has been reading Mircea Eliade’s *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, and relates Eliade’s argument to Olson that “all mythology is ontophany,” and that myth in the contemporary world functions to “reveal the structure of reality and the multiple modalities of being in the world.” (Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper, 1960) [French orig. 1957]).

¹⁰ Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought,’ 599.

¹¹ Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005): 186.

¹² Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought,’ 598.

removal, a removal of authorial identity from the poetic is required such that ontological truth remains sutured to the event and not to the poet or her or his expression. Therefore, the subjective dissemination within the poem functions as the site of arbitration between the poet and the subject, as opposed to attesting to the subject's dissolution. From a critical perspective, the reader has access to authorial presence, but in making his claim about the removal of the poet Prynne works to foreground the ontological in a state of preservation and access.

Brass is a poem about the effects of language, and the construction of radical, linguistic and political relations which have been permeated by violence and which are experienced at personal and social levels. The pursuit of knowledge through loss replicates a central point of Celan's 'Meridian' speech, one which Prynne works into his poem in a demonstrable example of the overlaying of contingent discourses. The layered presentation of discourses, which is foundational to *Brass*, stands as a position of development that Prynne would carry forward throughout his oeuvre. *Brass* replicates Celan's idea that "the poem becomes the poem of a person who still perceives, still turns towards phenomena, addressing and questioning them". In this way, the poem becomes "a conversation, [an] often desperate conversation" with one's accuser.¹³

The scope of *Brass* ranges to topics as widely disparate as politics, geochronology, financial market forces, unionism and mining strikes, transcontinental currents, social memory and the radical materialisation of modern communication. The poem is characterised by an emphatic and ferocious intellectualism, biting satire and a self-demanding sense of interrogation. Lyric and its function within the elegy has lost the lexically coherent dimension it retained through *Kitchen Poems* and *The White Stones*, but, as Keston Sutherland points out, the prosody of the lines and the disruptive syntactic breaks in *Brass* do not inhibit reading comprehension. Sutherland argues that *Brass* represents "a way to model a lyric, to make language a fact without desire".¹⁴ This analysis will argue that in *Brass* Prynne is working towards a lyric of radical, evental subjectivity, through which he is attempting to create new poetic thought. Lost now is the reclamatory power of the lyric as the unifier of the subject to the dwelling of home. *Brass* satirises the power of the lyric and myth as it was sustained throughout Prynne's previous collections. Augmenting a maxim of Celan's, *Brass* foregrounds the proposition that "language

¹³ Paul Celan, 'The Meridian,' *Collected Prose*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (New York: Routledge, 2003): 37-55, 50.

¹⁴ Sutherland, 'Hilarious absolute daybreak,' 120.

actualized, set free under the sign of a radical individuation [...] remains as aware of the limits drawn by language as of the possibilities it opens”.¹⁵

The Front Matter

The first edition of *Brass* appeared in 1971, printed by Andrew Crozier’s Ferry Press, and was printed in an oversize format in a deep auburn red. The title “Brass” hangs impressed in golden block letters on the cover’s upper margin, adding a distinct liturgical weight to the book. The cover does not contain any authorial designation, so the reader is left to confront the polysemy of the title’s semantic and semiotic operation. The operative function of the title’s “double music” (s.2/169) carries with it the brassy trumpeting of angels as well as the potential for music to give order to one’s life. The “double music” of *Brass* is both a summons to a higher order as well as a testament to destruction. Implied within the title’s block print are the violent overtones of recent European history and the lingering resonance of orchestral bands playing at Nazi internment camps. Reflecting on Blake’s lines, “I have taught pale artifice to spread his nets upon the morning. My heavens are brass my earth is iron”,¹⁶ reinforces David Trotter’s asserted connection between *Brass* and Blake.¹⁷ The cover of this collection announces both the sanctity and the threat of the music within.

Titles such as ‘The Bee Target on his Shoulder’, ‘Royal Fern’, ‘The Ideal Star-Fighter’, ‘L’Extase de M. Poher’, ‘Es Lebe der König’ (Prynne’s only dedicated elegy), and ‘Nothing Like Examples’ signal historical and theoretic directions towards which to begin an analytic reading. The title ‘Nothing Like Examples’ stands out for its self-referential tone and instils in the reader the understanding that the collection “doubts its own capacity to affect its communicative and analytic aims”.¹⁸ This is a rhetorical effect which turns out to be foundational to *Brass* and one that provides the reader *a priori* knowledge of the poem’s self-interrogative position.

¹⁵ Celan, ‘The Meridian,’ *Collected Prose*, 49.

¹⁶ William Blake, ‘The Four Zoas,’ *The Complete Writings of William Blake: with Variant Readings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1972): 290.

¹⁷ David Trotter, ‘A Reading of Prynne’s “Brass”,’ *PN Review*, 5.2 (1977): 49-53, 50.

¹⁸ Peter Middleton, ‘Institutions of Poetry in Postwar Britain,’ *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, eds. Nigel Alderman and C.D. Blanton (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2009): 243-63, 254.

The titles of the collection provide a basic layout for the established reading of the poems through socio-historical positions and established ontological aims. In a short analysis of the social conditions of postwar poetics, Peter Middleton writes that “every formal feature is [...] a socio-historical feature and at the same time makes possible links and adaptations between and across social and historical contexts: [this] points in the direction that a critical response might develop”.¹⁹

Where Prynne’s socio-historical complexes differ from general history is on the point of providing a multifaceted view of each contextual situation, a multifaceted view that Prynne describes as the “retrospective formalism of the occasion”.²⁰ That is to say, the poetic is never the historical, but articulates and preserves the unnameable aspects of history. In the essay ‘Poetic Thought’, Prynne writes, “Poetic thought is empowered within and through energies of language under pressure”, and although the poem represents and articulates the historical, the fact remains that “the language of poetry is its modality and material base, but whatever its relation with common human speech [or experience], the word-arguments in use are characteristically disputed territory, where prosody and verse-form press against unresolved structures and repeatedly transgress expectations”.²¹ In making this claim, and in making a claim for the authorial removal from a text, Prynne argues that the poem is an act of testimony to a singular truth, and not a subjective account of the historical.

Where the depiction of the socio-historical situation is predicated on the presentation of poetic subjectivity, Prynne’s retrospective formalism of the event allows for the reader to locate the ideological challenge of the poem within the social circumstances that it represents. Through intertextuality and ekphrasis,²² ‘Es Lebe der König’ depicts an experience

¹⁹ Middleton, ‘Institutions of Poetry in Postwar Britain,’ 254. Quoting Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 252.

²⁰ J.H. Prynne, ‘A letter to Andrew Crozier (13 Sep. 1966),’ *The English Intelligencer*, 1st ser., 8 [1966]: 109-10. Reprinted in Neil Pattison, Reitha Pattison, Luke Roberts, eds., *Certain Prose of The English Intelligencer* (Cambridge: Mountain Press, 2012): 20-22.

²¹ Prynne, ‘Poetic Thought,’ 598.

²² “Ekphrasis,” from the Greek, conjoined the words “ek” (out) and “phrazein” (to tell, or declare), and originally meant “to tell in full.” Ekphrasis first appeared in rhetorical writings attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (‘Rhetoric, 10.17,’ *On Literary Composition*, ed. and trans. W. Rhys Roberts (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910)). Later it became a school exercise, where it was defined as “an expository speech which vividly brings the subject before our eyes” (Leonhard Von Spengel, ed., *Rhetores graeci* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1894), discussing the work

of the Holocaust as an historicised event, which is developed by the reader’s knowledge of history and Celan’s writing on this experience. For Prynne, as for Terry Eagleton, developmental subjectivity is “displaced from its privileged position as unitary, transcendental, self-generative origin and grasped instead as the incoherent effect of a transindividual process of material signification inscribed within certain definite, historically particular practices and apparatus”.²³ The following analysis of the poem ‘Es Lebe der König’ will work to explicate the socio-historical details as they relate to the poem, and to investigate the transindividual processes, vantage points and positions of expression entailed within this elegy and its depiction of life under Nazi occupation.

The Idea of Subjectivity

Similar to the philosophy of Alain Badiou, and expressive of the characteristics Prynne would later define in ‘Poetic Thought’, ‘Es Lebe der König’ depicts the creation of new knowledge that arises through the violence of the situation and is preserved by the subject’s fidelity to the event. Badiou’s theory works by repositioning the engagement of the

of Aelius Theon, 1st century CE). The *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., eds. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 515, defines ekphrasis as “the rhetorical description of a work of art.” My own interpretation and application of the term follows the definition from the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, in that ekphrasis pertains to the incorporation of, or references to, works of literary, verbal or graphic art within another work of art. As Heffernan notes in *Museum of Words*, Linda Hutcheon delivered a lecture on “Postmodern Ekphrasis” at a Colloquium on Poetics at Columbia University in 1986 in which she used the term “ekphrasis” to include the incorporation of newspaper articles into the novels of Julio Cortázar and John Fowles. I would disagree with defining this incorporation as ekphrastic in relation to Prynne’s work, where newspaper reports, scientific data and other technical discourses are quoted, mimicked and utilised in the creation of Prynne’s poetic-construction. I would disagree that this is an example of ekphrasis, in that this usage pertains more to the incorporation of other discourses within a poetic, as a means to test and highlight the systems of language used in everyday communication, and does not refer to outside works of art. ‘Ekphrasis,’ *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993): 192; James A.W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 191-92.

²³ Terry Eagleton, ‘Ideology, Fiction, Narrative,’ *Social Text*, 2 (Summer 1979): 62-80, 70.

subject to the event, in a sutured relation to a truth-process. Badiou argues that “[t]he event is that which ruptures the situational order of being in the domain of knowledge. And this is the order of truth and what you call the truth-event”.²⁴ As with Jacques Derrida, the event for Badiou is both a rupture and a redoubling; it is supplemental, for it entails the creation of a new subject in the process of the continuation of the subject.²⁵ As the concept of the event entails a real rupture of the situation, it is in maintaining fidelity to that event that a new subjectivity emerges. A subject who remains in fidelity to the event preserves this truth as a concept in the domain of knowledge. Thus all truth is created in the process of fidelity, and this fidelity in relation to ‘Es Lebe der König’ we can contextualise as bearing witness. In ‘Es Lebe der König’, Prynne utilises the concept of the naming of the void to signify the rupture of the situation to produce new knowledge: new poetic thought. This analysis will specify the naming of the voids in the poem as they relate to the natural, the domestic, the sustentive and the witness, invoked through the name of Paul Celan, to highlight the transfiguration each of these themes undertakes in the creation of poetic meaning.

The existence of the event forms the real and absent course of a truth. For Badiou, that a truth always begins as a naming of the void is based on his argument that the void is a real but ungraspable part of the situation. As expressed through *Brass*, the naming of the voids in the situation reifies Badiou’s position that “a truth does draw its support not from consistency but from inconsistency. It is not a matter of formulating correct judgements, but of producing the murmur of the indiscernible”.²⁶ The poem ‘Es Lebe der König’ contextualises the circumstances of the Holocaust and the death of Paul Celan, and evokes the name of Celan as the murmur of the indiscernible. ‘Es Lebe der König’ attempts to actively preserve the lives of Holocaust victims and the life of Paul Celan. The poem represents, as Giorgio Agamben writes, a committed act of remembrance, in that “[r]emembrance restores possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was. Remembrance is neither what happened nor what did not happen but, rather, their potentialisation, their becoming possible once again.”²⁷ Against the events of historical violence, ‘Es Lebe der König’ preserves

²⁴ Badiou and Critchley, ‘Ours is not a terrible situation,’ 361.

²⁵ Badiou and Critchley, ‘Ours is not a terrible situation,’ 362.

²⁶ Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 2003): 91. Quotation amended for clarity.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 267.

the testimony of the witnesses through “the creation of the possibility of naming that which was without name”.²⁸

Elegy for Celan

‘Es Lebe der König’ is positioned as an active investigation of the bathetic social conditions and sense of alienation in the postwar world. Prynne’s elegy to Paul Celan was composed the year after Celan’s death, and utilises and responds to Celan’s poetic. ‘Es Lebe der König’ exemplifies Prynne’s ability to answer loss with language, in a manner that reflects one of his oldest preoccupations, that the life of the heart is defined by how one knows the land. Reading ‘Es Lebe der König’ as a pastoral elegy reinforces Prynne’s declaration that “the consequence of this / pastoral desire is prolonged / as our condition”.²⁹ The poem, as well as the landscape depicted, is engrained within the history of the event, and comprise a poetic construction which is reliant on many antecedents, most notably Celan’s writing. In this manner, the representation of the landscape is always a political utterance, a framework that highlights issues of control, contortion and degradation. The prosodic form of ‘Es Lebe der König’ contains a number of features and concepts that establish its connection to the history of the elegy. The line count of the first three stanzas climbs from nine, to ten, to eleven lines. The prosody of the poem, in this case, is also utilised by Prynne as a point of referentiality. In the second stanza, Prynne’s ten lines mimic John Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, and Prynne’s line, “It is not possible to / drink this again,” (s.2/169) reverberates off Keats’s “That I might drink and leave the world unseen”.³⁰ Also echoing off Keats’s line, “Here, where men sit and hear each other groan”,³¹ is Prynne’s line, “we hear your / fearful groan and choose not to think of it” (s.3/169). This is the only uncapitalised sentence in Prynne’s elegy, indicating a deteriorating agency of the subjective group depicted.³² From the eleven-line strophe, the poem climbs to a

²⁸ Badiou and Critchley, ‘Ours is not a terrible situation,’ 364.

²⁹ Prynne, ‘Moon Poem,’ *The White Stones*, 26-27, 26; *Poems*, 53-54, 53-54.

³⁰ John Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ *Collected Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982): 279.

³¹ Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ 279.

³² It should be highlighted that the uncapitalised line “we hear your [...]” appears in the first Fremantle/Bloodaxe edition of *Poems* [South Fremantle, Western Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press / Folio (Salt); Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1999] where a full stop concludes the previous line. In the second Fremantle/Bloodaxe edition of *Poems* [North Fremantle, Western

strophe of thirteen lines, then a final strophe or coda of five lines, which is filled with declamatory statements verifying the events of which the poem speaks, “it is so” and “you know” (s.5/170). The poem flits between strophic configurations as it vacillates between ode, elegy and pastoral conventions, with the final strophe providing the reader with a detailed and highly symbolic account of family love and forbearance. Prynne’s declaration that “the history of person / [is the] entire condition of landscape”³³ provides some incentive to believe that the prosodic vacillation of the poem’s linear count is striving towards a stanzaic pattern it can never reach, towards a model of lyric to which the social conditions the poem depicts cannot be reconciled.

‘Es Lebe der König’ is an attempt to render through language the horror facing Holocaust victims, rather than to represent and comment upon this horror. The poem’s semantic and semiotic ambiguity produces a connotative string of references and intertextual relations to Celan, as well as to elegiac and pastoral antecedents. David Trotter argues that Prynne turns towards the work of Celan to recover the strategy of the poem’s estrangement, in that the poem “requires self-estrangement, an endless iteration of mortality and gratuitousness, and Prynne’s poem for Celan explores, I think, the redeeming power of such ruthlessness”.³⁴ The passage from the pastoral frame to an image-complex structured on the Holocaust replicates the failed enframing of the poem in standard stanzaic or strophic patterns. As Geoffrey Ward argues,

There is an awareness of a spectrum of experience through which the inner and outer are not separate, ranging from unity with Nature, to the self as conduit for social forces and signs. The first draws on an immersion in the European Romantic traditions shared by these writers, the second on the transition of Romantic phenomenology to an urban and secular realm.³⁵

The poem finds coherence in the presentation of an experience of life under Nazi occupation and a subtext that creates a biographic trace of Celan’s life. The poem leaves the pastoral realm and becomes immersed in

Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press; Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2005] and in the most recent Bloodaxe edition of *Poems* [2015], a comma concludes the previous line.

³³ Prynne, ‘First Notes on Daylight,’ *The White Stones*, 41; *Poems*, 69.

³⁴ Trotter, ‘A Reading of Prynne’s “Brass”,’ 51.

³⁵ Geoffrey Ward, ‘Nothing but Mortality: Prynne and Celan,’ *Contemporary Poetry Meets Modern Theory*, eds. Antony Easthope and John Thomson (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991): 139-52, 142.

and calibrated by the socio-historical circumstances of the Holocaust to express the persecution of its subjects. By enacting the moral horror through which Celan survived, but which ultimately cost him his life, the poem “stands in relation to truth, by enacting the disappearance of subjectivity”.³⁶

The unknowability of the event of Celan’s death, and Celan’s subjective absence from the poem, can be strongly associated with the unspoken name of Celan. In ‘Es Lebe der König’ the name ‘Celan’ acts as the unknown signifier that brings absence into presence. The invocation of a proper name allows the real of the truth event to be inscribed in the symbolic fiction of the poem.³⁷ As Badiou argues, in the “proper name, the ordinary individual discovers glorious, distinctive individuals as the mediation of his or her own individuality, as the proof that he or she can force its finitude. The anonymous actions of millions of militants, rebels, fighters, [in this case, victims] unrepresentable as such, is combined and counted in the simple, powerful symbol of the proper name”.³⁸ By retaining the unspoken name of Paul Celan, the poem ‘Es Lebe der König’ preserves the testimony of the witness. The biographic elegy to Celan allows Prynne the ability to detail a history without “distorting the experience of truth.”³⁹ Paralleling the dispossession Prynne found within Celan’s work, ‘Es Lebe der König’ represents a poet who is “forced to occupy his estrangement deeply”.⁴⁰

Prynne’s elegy appeared less than one year after Celan’s death by drowning, and it provokes a demanding philosophical encounter: it reflects both Celan’s encounter with Martin Heidegger and also Prynne’s divergence with Heidegger’s political, philosophical and linguistic trajectory. ‘Es Lebe der König’ is a poem about the power of the alienated individual to affect radical change through forbearance in a world dominated by violence. *Brass* is a call to a poetics of personal, social and political articulation; it is a call to right the moral mutation that has been introduced into the species described in ‘The Ideal Star-Fighter’ (27-28/165-66). The full exploration of genetic and technological abrogation

³⁶ Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics*, 176.

³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Living In End Times* (London: Verso, 2011): 128. Commenting on Badiou’s use of proper names.

³⁸ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010): 249.

³⁹ Keston Sutherland, ‘The Trade In Bathos,’ *Jacket*, 15 (December 2001): <<http://jacketmagazine.com/15/sutherland-bathos.html>> [accessed November 12 2010].

⁴⁰ Ward, ‘Nothing but Mortality,’ 140.

of the natural appears much later in Prynne's *Acrylic Tips*, though already in 'Es Lebe der König' the systemic incursion of technology and its operations in the Holocaust form a dominant portion of Prynne's ontological argument. The unifying themes of the technologisation of the land and the pastoral elegy across both 'Es Lebe der König' and *Acrylic Tips* denote the manner in which Prynne's poetic constructions actively attest to the wounding, division and control of land, life and poetic thought.

Brass represents an attempt to instigate individual thought and action regarding the social circumstances that produce human atrocities, and it is intended to stimulate contemplation of the role that social complicity plays in these acts. Prynne enacts this address to the reader through the lyrical construction of the poems. According to Sutherland,

The poem implicitly announces a shift in the moralism of knowledge away from anything like eidetic phenomenology, with its bracketing of affectivity along with ontic commitments, towards the project of a lyric beyond subjectivity, that is, beyond memory, appetite, greed, and all the other consolations for predatoriness that make up the spiral curve of the bourgeois autobiography, a project that would come into full view only much later in Prynne's work.⁴¹

Where Sutherland distinguishes the aim of Prynne's poetic towards a lyric beyond subjectivity, this dissertation will argue that this is rather a displacement of subjectivity from the personal, which asks for a reading of the poem as divorced from the physical author. In 'Es Lebe der König' Prynne is working towards a lyric of radical, eventual subjectivity, which maintains fidelity to the socio-historical circumstances of the Holocaust and to the life of Celan. It is, in this regard, a poem with its sights set beyond subjectivity, as it tends towards a humanistic and ontological model for understanding history. Prynne's project is a call to resistance which lyric hopes to strike, and entails within it an ethic defined by and speaking from within the historical system it describes.

The ethical and ontological focus of Prynne's poems form, as Andrés Rodríguez writes, a set of conditions surrounding the ardent matter of Prynne's art. Reflecting on a letter Prynne sent to Duncan McNaughton, Rodríguez argues that Prynne's political poetic points

to the situation of a man whose self-knowledge and responsibility to others lies in vocational urgency. For this poet, whose verse is not a convention

⁴¹ Sutherland, 'Hilarious absolute daybreak,' 131.