The Obstinate reader: Prynne, prosody and degrees of engagement

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J.H. Prynne's later poetry has been described by Simon Jarvis as a 'sung curriculum'; more specifically, as 'as braced a sung curriculum of the arts and sciences as might be managed by some single pedagogue'.[1] That Prynne has something to teach his readers is a widely held assumption, and his work is often presented in didactic terms.[2] Analysis of Prynne's song, on the other hand—which I shall take to mean the sound patterns made by his poetry when read aloud—remains remarkably infrequent, despite the fact that many critics have made allusions to the 'movement' of Prynne's poetry, to its 'gesture', to its 'music';[3] this under-description of form remains, indeed, a feature of the reception of much experimental or non-mainstream poetry.

This is particularly regrettable in the case of Prynne. Perhaps no contemporary poet divides readers so sharply as Prynne; and while it is difficult to

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[1] Simon Jarvis, 'The incommunicable silhouette', *Jacket*, 24 (Nov 2003), <http://jacketmagazine.com/24/jarvis-tis.html> (para 7 of 7).
[2] See, for example, many of the essays collected in *A Manner of Utterance: The Poetry of J.H. Prynne*, ed. by Ian Brinton (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009).
[3] Edward Larrissy, '*Poets* of *A Various Art*: J.H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Andrew Crozier', *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, ed. James Acheson and Romana Huk (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), pp. 63-79 (p. 67); John Wilkinson, 'Counterfactual Prynne: An Approach to *Not-You*', *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess*, Cambridge: Salt, 2007, pp 5-20 (p. 12); Jim Keery, 'Controlled Amazement', *Cambridge Quarterly* 35 (2006), 76-81 (p. 76).

Lacy Rumsey, 'The Obstinate reader: Prynne, prosody and degrees of engagement'.
Thinking Verse I (2011), 44-66.
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debate the didactic qualities of his poetry, since the differences between what different readers will appreciate or tolerate being taught are vast, yet there is a hope, perhaps forlorn, that all readers of Prynne, whatever their other allegiances or tastes, are susceptible to the sound patterns of spoken English, and that some basis for dialogue may be located in the analysis of those patterns peculiar to his poetry. Moreover, given the philosophical and theoretical implications which Prynne's readers have sometimes seen in the relationship between his poetry and the spoken word, such areas may be worth addressing from the standpoint of prosody, and indeed linguistics—specifically discourse linguistics—as much as from that of an overtly philosophical poetics.

In conducting this discussion, the essay will attempt a degree of focus on the detail of how readers may construct their performance of poems that is greater than that commonly found, and than would be necessary for the discussion of poetry in more familiar forms, particularly those of regular metres and stanzas. There is an unpredictability to the performance of experimental verse that often discourages critics from addressing its sonic qualities, since these are seen as too dependent on highly variable decisions taken by a variety of readers. My contention is that we need to start to talk about those decisions, and about the performances that may arise from them. This may be an epistemologically fragile undertaking, but the alternative is to pass up all opportunity to talk precisely and meaningfully about the sound of some of the poetries that interest us.

It sometimes seems that the more philosophical or poetics-based approaches to Prynne's work operate on the assumption that his poems are to be read silently, or, if voiced, voiced in a uniquely depersonalized way. Two examples serve here. The first is from John Wilkinson, writing of the opening lines of the cycle *Into the Day* (1972):

> Who is being enjoined, insistently and in a discourse whose adjectival sparingness brooks no argument? This writing's articles

> and deictics assert that we know the score. Outrageously, because the model of the poem as a man's speaking to men is so inculcated that a poem exhibited or staged, to be approached, read around, considered at different times and in different lights; or the poem as a score or plough-line to be followed; or the poem as orchestration (intellectual and musical) to be attended to or entered; none of these possibilities can offer itself until the speech model has been closed off as resolutely as these first lines achieve in the face of the obstinate reader. Although the cadences of speech in high rhetorical mode charge Prynne's prosody here, they eschew the assumed intimacy of contemporary lyric.[4]

Wilkinson makes an important point in his diagnosis of the authority of Prynne's writing, and its insistent withholding of the contextual information that its grammar and deixis would appear to presume. However, it is not clear why these characteristics should be opposed to a 'speech model' of poetry. Wilkinson's use of the term 'speech model' remains undefined, though it presumably refers back to what he calls 'the model of the poem as a man speaking to men'—which, in turn, seems to suggest the notion that a lyric poem is conventionally read as little more than a kind of transcription of a step in a conversation; [5] and, therefore, that readers of any poetry that is less frontally deranging than Prynne—Larkin, say, or presumably, given the allusion to the 1802 preface, Wordsworth—are uninterested in the formal potential of the language. This is a debatable, although a widely held position.

More germane to this essay are the methodological problems that may result, here and elsewhere, if speech is theorized purely as a function of the rejection of this simple model of author-reader communication. Wilkinson does not—here, at least—inquire how the *reader's* speech is to be theorized or described, nor what kinds of speech might arise if the poem is indeed treated, as Wilkinson

[4] John Wilkinson, 'Into the Day', *The Lyric Touch*, pp. 33-35 (p. 34).
[5] Related statements may be found in Wilkinson's other writings on Prynne; in one study, he asks what it would mean 'to lift the dependency of poetry upon speech acts' (Wilkinson, 'Counterfactual Prynne', p. 9).

suggests, as a 'score' or 'orchestration'—terms with which I am in complete sympathy. This may, of course, be a simple omission, but the closing reference to 'the cadences of speech in high rhetorical mode' seems revealingly impersonal in the context of what has gone before: it is as if rhetorical speech, at least within the confines of a poem, needed no speaker.

Writing of the difficulty of construing the syntax of the poems of Prynne's sequence *For the Monogram*, Simon Jarvis argues that:

> One might interpret these critical deletions of syntactic orientation points […] as a systematic attempt on the poet's part to deprive his work of what he often refers to as "vantage". […] Prynne's poetry holds unswervingly to the concept of universality which underlies the idea of the common reader, but turns it against the false, limited, and vantaged pseudo-universality which the *common reader* has come to stand for. It is as though his work, always impatient of any self-exculpating alibi of delay, had at once decided to write from the standpoint of universality. Yet this with three riders: that relinquishing vantage should never mean absolutizing indifference; that writing as if from the standpoint of universality shows that no single individual can ever stand there; and that the attempt to write universally necessarily, and for this purpose, exhibits the privated sectors of "our" language in their deepest failure to communicate.[6]

The nuanced critique of 'vantaged pseudo-universality' appears to have something in common with Wilkinson's rejection of a 'the model of the poem as a man's speaking to men': both writers express hostility to the attempt to locate a poem in an originating viewpoint, even if only Jarvis makes explicit, in order to rebut, the claims to universality that might be made for such a viewpoint. For Jarvis, in this passage, the techniques of Prynne's poetry seek to destroy the possibility of the poem's being read as arising from such a viewpoint, in favour of a genuine universality on which no single individual could make a claim. Here again, it is worth inquiring whether the analysis might not be extended to take in a consideration of the dynamics of reading, and in particular of reading aloud. It

[6] Jarvis, 'The incommunicable silhouette', para. 2.

may be theoretically possible to write as from a standpoint of universality, though what this might mean is a difficult question to answer without drawing on the specific philosophical traditions to which Jarvis may implicitly be referring. Yet, assuming that it is, we can in turn ask: is it possible to *read*—and specifically to *read aloud*—from such a standpoint? And if so, is that a standpoint which Prynne's poetry—as opposed, if necessary, to Prynne the poet—encourages us to adopt, or even to countenance?

Prynne himself appears deliberately unengaged with the question of reading aloud, on the one hand expressing a 'lack of interest in the performance of poems in their author's own voice', and on the other giving no attention that I have seen to the question of how his own poems are or might be performed by others.[7] 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', his remarkable recent essay, gives a theoretical backing to this non-engagement with performance, espousing what in phonological terms might be called a purely competence-based model of poetic sound. It proposes to treat 'the sounds that poems make [not] as acoustic sonorities, but as semi-abstract representations', and argues that 'it is the language of the text that has and produces voice, and not the mere vocal equipment and habits of a speaker'.[8] Expressing a faith in what it calls 'the alterative effect of textuality', the essay takes notable issue with Derek Attridge's contention that 'poems are made out of spoken language':

> I believe this statement to be decisively not true, unless it is also to be believed that tables and chairs are made out of living trees.[9]

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[7] J.H. Prynne, 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work', *Chicago Review* 55.1 (2010), 126-157 (p. 130). Prynne has given public readings – on the only such occasion I have attended, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in January 2009, doing so with apparent pleasure – , although such occasions are rare. 'Mental Ears and Poetic Work' suggests that audiences may delusively consider authorial performance to enjoy a privileged relationship to the text: "'Look, the poet is wearing red socks! Now, at last, we understand everything!'" (130).

[8] Prynne, 'Mental Ears', p. 130. A phonological underpinning for this position is set out in Prynne's endnotes (pp. 145-7); its assumption of the irrelevance of performance to phonology echoes that of early generativism.

[9] 'Mental Ears', p. 144. Attridge is quoted from *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 2.

Attridge's original point is certainly open to debate—although it should be borne in mind that its aim and context are primarily pedagogical—yet Prynne's resolution of the question is formulated in fascinating terms. The opposition of 'living trees' and the wood of furniture seems to suggest that, for Prynne, speech ('living trees') intervenes in the life of a poem only prior to, or in the process of, its composition; once speech is cast into text ('table and chairs'), and altered thereby, no *reader's* speech is envisaged as arising in turn from the finished product; the living trees have become wood, presumably definitively so. If this is indeed Prynne's position, it is unsurprising that poet and prosodist should on this point not see eye to eye.

For any 'obstinate reader' (to adopt Wilkinson's phrase) who would, despite such strictures, seek to forge his or her own relationship to the speech sounds of Prynne's poetry—that is, who would read the poem aloud, and try to do so as adequately as possible, inventing, if necessary, the criteria that might underpin such a judgement—an indifference to or neglect of performance is more than unhelpful; likewise for any for any critic or prosodist who would seek to understand that relationship. Wilkinson and Jarvis's respective essays, among the best available on Prynne, make some invaluable points, but the questions they raise for performance have so far gone unanswered. How might readers work their voicings around what Jarvis calls the 'critical deletions of syntactic orientation points', or deal with the pragmatic implications of 'systematic attempt on the poet's part to deprive his work of […] "vantage"'? How can readers perform deictics that 'assert that we know the score' (Wilkinson), when they themselves patently do *not* know the score? These questions do not simply point to difficulties of interpretation, but to cruxes of performance, cruxes whose unusual nature may constitute a significant and valued feature of reading Prynne's poetry; they can neither be theorized nor understood unless adequate attention is paid to speech, and to the pragmatics of reading aloud.

For the discourse linguist David Brazil, reading aloud is characterized by one of five *degrees of engagement* with a text.[10] Minimal engagement occurs when, for example, we read isolated words from a dictionary, maximal when we imagine ourselves fully in a conversational context—when the reader '[sees] the text as the embodiment of a speaker's viewpoint, [assimilates] that viewpoint to his or her own, and [creates] notional hearers for whom the expressed information has relevance' (222). Brazil's study argues that differing stages of engagement have specific phonological consequences. As engagement increases, there is a decrease in the proportion of stressed syllables that receive pitch accents. The reason is that, given a sense of a particular discourse context within which some items in a sentence or sentence domain are judged more interesting than others, a reader, like a speaker, is likely to place focus only on the more interesting items, suppressing the accents that she or he might otherwise have assigned to other items. This phenomenon is known as *deaccenting*, and it is typically applied to material of a variety of kinds: for example, to items that have already been mentioned, that represent information that can be taken for granted, that represent meanings intimately shared by speaker and listener, or that the speaker simply chooses to play down:

> If you try to avoid any shield at all [in riding a motorcycle] the force of the rain is like having sand thrown in your face.

Of this example, which he takes to illustrate 'the power of a figure of speech', Dwight Bolinger notes that '"sand" is the point of the simile and everything that follows it is de-accented'.[11] Deaccenting may have interesting implications for the

[10] David Brazil, 'Listening to People Reading', in *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis*, ed. Malcolm Coulthard (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 209-41 (p. 11). Subsequent references will be included in the text.

[11] Dwight Bolinger, 'Accent is Predictable (If You're a Mind-Reader)', *Language*, 48 (1972), 633-44 (p. 639). The first full discussion of deaccenting was D. Robert Ladd Jr., *The Structure of Intonational Meaning: Evidence from English* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), Ch. 4.

rhythm of non-metrical, or partly metrical, poetry: since the lexical stresses included in the deaccented passage are not associated with pitch accents, it is arguably less likely than would otherwise be the case that speaker or listener will infer from them one of the sporadic short sequences of metrical beats in which non-metrical poetry, like speech, is often rich.

A second phenomenon that accompanies an increase in engagement is a distribution of intonation-group (or 'tone-unit') boundaries that is motivated by a broad range of communicative considerations. In a minimally engaged reading, on the contrary, intonation-group boundaries are likely to be assigned on purely textual grounds—one tone unit per sentence, or in the case of versified poetry one tone unit per line.

Finally, changes in the degree of engagement are associated by Brazil with changes in tone choice. Greater engagement will bring an increase in the proportion of tones that are rising rather than falling. According to Brazil, falling tones are associated with information that is treated by the speaker as new, and of no particular relevance to a pre-existing discourse situation; for this reason, they are sometimes called *proclaiming* tones. The less engaged a reader is in an imagined situation, the more each new piece of information must be treated by him or her as genuinely new; a predominance of proclaiming—falling—tones may thus reflect a reduced engagement with the material being read aloud. Conversely, rising tones—sometimes known as *referring* tones—suggest (among other things) a desire to relate material to its context. This is an interesting area, but not directly related to the focus of this essay. More relevant is the phenomenon of the selection of level or zero tone, which has been found to occur in situations where speech is presented as ritualised and removed from particular discourse contexts; in liturgy,

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For more recent comment see Anne Wennerstrom, *The Music of Everyday Speech: Prosody and Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 38.

for example, and also in some forms of poetry reading.[12] Brazil describes this as 'ritualized oblique reading', and associates it with a relatively low level of engagement, the second of his postulated five stages (210). He particularly identifies it with poetry reading, arguing that '*an acceptable ritualized reading will follow an acceptable fully engaged reading in all matters except that tone differences are levelled under zero tone*' (215). A high proportion of level tones can, for example, be heard in recordings of W.B. Yeats reading his own poems.[13] Whether this is a performance style that suits the poetry of Prynne is a question to which this essay will return.

The implication of Wilkinson's and Jarvis's respective critiques of a poetry of speech act and "vantage" would be that Prynne's work is most appropriately read with a stance that falls significantly short of full engagement, if that engagement is understood, following David Brazil, as 'a kind of reading that replicates interactive speech: speech in which participants pursue conversational purposes taking into account the entire complex network of shared assumptions' (222). The incompatibility of a stance of full engagement with, in particular, Wilkinson's account of an 'eschewal of intimacy', seems clear. Brazil notes that engagement comes easily to readers aloud as soon as one has more to work with than an isolated word, suggesting that 'the tendency of the reader to construct some kind of rudimentary discourse context even for a single sentence is very general' (218). A first observation might be, therefore, that if Prynne's poetry does indeed encourage us to avoid the construction of viewpoints and discourse contexts, it thereby counter-acts our pre-existing tendency to construct such contexts. This may help to account for the feeling of tension that reading Prynne's work aloud can induce.

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[12] See Anne Wichmann, 'Prosodic Style: A Corpus-Based Approach', in *Working With Speech: Perspectives on Research into the Lancaster / IBM Spoken English Corpus*, ed. by Gerry Knowles, Anne Wichmann and Peter Alderson (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 168-88.
[13] On the Internet, Yeats's recordings are at time of writing conveniently grouped at <http://villasubrosa.com/Nathan/audyeats.html>.

Features reflecting a relative avoidance of engagement may be a regular characteristic of the reading aloud of experimental or avant-garde writing. The assignment of tone-unit boundaries on purely textual grounds, in particular, may be thought to be particularly probable in reading a poem whose meaning or syntax are significantly disrupted, such that no contextual cues are available. In some poetry by Clark Coolidge, for example, the parataxis is such that some readers may resort to associating a single word with a single tone unit, these units then functioning as discursively and intonationally discrete rhythmic counters, while others will assign tone units line-by-line.[14] Other poetic styles are likely to elicit a different response; the shorter poetry of William Carlos Williams, for example, is frequently very suitable to reading with full engagement—that is to say, to the construction of a fictional situation against which the poem may be understood, and the attempt to reflect that situation in performance.[15] Prynne's work, even his late work, seems to fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum of probable reader engagement. Based in complete, if often unfathomable sentences, Prynne's poetry asks readers to attend at the very least to the internal relations the text builds up. Wilkinson's discussion of Prynne's *Not-You*, though not directly related to the question of reading aloud, provides one description of such a relationship between reader and text:

> If neither trust nor reality-testing against a social and historical world assumed to be commonly accessible can be relied upon to negotiate these poems, then what binds them together, what principle permits them to be read as anything other than an arbitrary heap of intriguing phraseology?
>
> Prynne's writing can be seen progressively to eschew semantic integrity in favour of referential integrity. […] [S]emantic integrity involves a check on external conditions […] whereas

[14] See Aldon L. Nielsen, 'Clark Coolidge and a Jazz Aesthetic', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 28 (1993), 94-112 (pp. 98-99). Coolidge's own readings can be found at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Coolidge.php>.

[15] Charles Altieri, 'Presence and Reference in a Literary Text: The Example of Williams' 'This Is Just to Say'", *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (1979), 489-510.

> referential integrity implies validation within the information system […] Thus orientated, it might prove rewarding to enter this possible world in expectation of discovering a set of relationships and of transformations which do at least hold true by analogy with relationships and transformations with which we are familiar without making direct appeal to these.[16]

If this is indeed the way in which Prynne's poetry asks to be read, then it will correspond, in performance terms, to the fourth of Brazil's five levels of engagement, 'at which the reader's intonation choices are in line with each newly created context of interaction that the progressive relation in the text sets up', and where 'the reader relies exclusively on what has gone before' (220, 222). This may, indeed, form a fair working hypothesis for understanding how readers process and perform Prynne's poetry, though one to which a consideration of the influence of that poetry's inclusion of relatively frequent metrical passages would need to be added. It should also be noted that readers do not select a single degree of engagement when reading; when beginning an unfamiliar text they are likely to begin somewhere in the middle, increase engagement as their understanding of the text increases, but 'move down the scale of engagement […] when [they] encounter cognitive problems' (Brazil 221), such as a problematic piece of language for which they cannot easily construct a syntax or a context. This is a facility to which readers of Prynne are likely, I think, to find themselves having recourse rather frequently.

Putting the poetics, the poetry and the discourse analysis together leads us, then, to a working model of Prynne's late poetry as being read with a largely text-internal set of interpretive procedures and consequent performance choices, with the reader scaling back his or her engagement when faced with particularly difficult words or phrases. The question is: will this suffice as a pragmatic model, or will there be moments at which the reader is faced with choices that lie at the limit of

[16] Wilkinson, 'Counterfactual Prynne', p. 11.

what can be informed by text-internal relations? In Prynne's earlier poetry there is no doubt that the reader is frequently drawn towards a very full engagement with the discourse contexts—however multiple and fragmentary—that the poem throws up. Yet the more recent work—to which Jarvis's analysis, as well as some of Wilkinson's, are directed—may constitute a special case.

The questions raised so far would gain from the examination of a variety of poems by Prynne, and a variety of his readers; this discussion, which seeks to be preliminary and exploratory, must limit itself to detailed analysis of a single poem. 'The Stony Heart of Her' is the first poem in the sequence *Her Weasels Wild Returning* (1994). It manifests two of Prynne's best-known techniques; a lexical practice so varied that it is difficult to know in what sense to take any individual word, and how individual lexical items are to relate to each other; a syntax which, while filling up each sentence from initial capital to final full stop, allows immense ambiguity and apparent incoherence to characterise the syntactic status of individual words, such that the reader has little sense of whether, and how, the component parts of the sentence might be fitted together.

The Stony Heart of Her

At leisure for losing outward in a glazed toplight
bringing milk in, another fire and pragma cape
upon them both; they'll give driven to marching
with wild fiery streaks able. Will either sermon
sift over, down with his line, ripped away on a plain
deception: nothing to save on this boiling turn. For
even I speak to her the sun was lowered, at bulk
modified by excluded point failure, did ever she
know it, saving the infant a place ahead by her
mission grab to repair both. For the escape drill
blanks, in teeth of surmised streamers in white,
valeur aux ténèbres. How much would be visible

to set up a fish wire, meat in his face as a fire

clay marker. Dash out the very first answer fast,
see hear she hears the assay debenture, her peak
sail crowds white under. Slow parting with a crack.
Light distracted from its vent holding will so
grace a line blunted, she said: for all of it
miss a rock indifferently. Overt play over tints
hardly the brackish surplus, where else to be
more careful yet with my blood still. Save whom
in fancy sent away, both will do as if by choice
made ready by vocals. Now washing the front place
quickly, speak to her: on tap here, here, here.[17]

It is important to emphasize that, for all its difficulty, 'The Stony Heart of Her' has a great deal to offer a reader who would read it aloud. It is, most notably, a highly rhythmic poem, moving in and out of sporadic bursts of metricality. The marked enjambments and mid-line punctuation constitute an inducement to create phrase-aligned, rather than line-aligned, sequences of beats:[18]

ripped away on a plain
[B o B -o- B

deception: nothing to save on this boiling turn
o B o] [B -o- B -o- B o B]

saving the infant a place ahead
B -o- B -o- B o B

[17] J.H. Prynne, *Poems*, 2nd edn (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre and Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 410. I am very grateful to the poet for his permission to quote the full text of this poem, which is © J.H. Prynne.

[18] The metrical scansion marks are those associated with the beat-offbeat metrics developed by Derek Attridge in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982). The version used here is that included in Thomas Carper and Derek Attridge, *Meter and Meaning: An Introduction to Rhythm in Poetry* (London: Routledge, 2003). The marks are listed in an appendix to this article. The scansions included in this article use one mark not proposed by Attridge: square brackets, which enable scansions to indicate the perceived boundaries of sequences of beats that are not coterminous with a single line.

to set up a fish wire, meat in his face
o B -o- B o B -o- B

Save whom
[O B

in fancy sent away, both will do as if by choice
o B o B o B] [B o B o b o B]

The satisfactions of articulating such sequences are, however secure or insecure the reader feels in his or her understanding of the poem, important ones.

It can also be noted that this is probably not a poem that responds best to the level-tone style of speech. This is not, in other words, a poem for intoning, Yeatsian or otherwise. This is a judgement I form on aesthetic grounds, which are clearly open to discussion. But I also form it on the basis of my sense of the text. A predominance of level tones—Brazil's 'ritualized oblique reading'—implies an avoidance of confrontation with a possible discourse context, since level tone neither refers to the detail of that context nor proclaims that the speaker is adding meaningfully to it. Prynne's poetry, on the contrary, seems rather to force confrontation than to avoid it. A comparable choice is at issue in reading other Prynne texts of this period; the fourth poem in *Her Weasels Wild Returning*, 'Attending Her Aggregate, Detour', begins as follows:

> Service also reformed to a bench position, tended evenly
> through oat refringence, why does it shake at a done-out
> tabular entry; can't she see the self difference or is it
> not set in pure gum for a notebook.[19]

There is a challenge to the reader here, a challenge that is repeated fairly frequently in Prynne's late poetry: how does one perform yes-no questions (can't she see, is it

[19] *Poems*, p. 413.

not set) to which no question-mark has been appended? One could avoid the challenge by using level tone; but far more interesting, far more uncomfortable, and perhaps far more revealing, is the attempt to do intonational justice to such contradictory cues—perhaps by using rising tones, but conveying the flatness of the punctuation by reducing the height of those rises.

Thirdly, we can notice that in most cases, the poem's metrical sequences do not require a high degree of engagement in order to be audible. Such an engagement seems, indeed, very unlikely, given the fact of the poem's ceaseless trawling of the unfamiliar: lexical items whose role is largely mysterious cannot be deaccented, as they do not form part of a pre-existing context that can readily be imagined: in consequence, the rhythm can derive from the simple and largely alternating patterns of lexically stressed and unstressed syllables of which much of the poem is constructed.

Fourthly, the poem has, for all its difficulties, a relatively strong sense of coherence, based on the recurrence of the personal pronouns *I*, *she* and *they* and on a certain sense that the disparate images coalesce around notions of femininity, violence and the male gaze. These notions are signalled fairly clearly at certain points. '[S]et up a fish wire, meat in his face' suggests some form of violent impulse; 'bringing milk in' evokes the collecting of the morning's milk from the front doorstep, but may also function as a reference to mother's milk, especially in the context of a poem focusing on 'her' and subsequently mentioning an 'infant'; 'washing the front place' seems to me to have at least two readily available interpretations, one directing us back to the doorstep, one—via the diffidence of 'place'—more sexual. Whichever dominates a particular reading, the sense is strong of a female figure that has emerged and that can be looked at by one or more rather troubling male spectators.

That such links may be drawn suggests that a reading short of full engagement is quite possible; the sentences have sufficient material in common to allow the reader a relatively rich sense of their discursive relations, and the rhythms

respond well to a reading that avoids the deaccenting that is characteristic of a stance of full engagement. Where the text offers syntactic confusion, via its many short, dense sequences of content words whose syntactic status is unclear, the reader can reduce his or her level of engagement, and read the confusing material more or less in citation form: 'fire clay marker' – 'wild fiery streaks able' – 'give driven' – 'escape drill blanks' – 'assay debenture' – 'peak sail crowds white under' - 'vent holding'. In some cases the metricality of the context will make room for these sequences; in others, their syntactic and semantic ambiguity may constrain the reader to slow down so much, and articulate so clearly, that regularity and thus rhythm take a back seat.

As far as these analyses go, then, a coalescence of poetics and discourse analysis around John Wilkinson's account of Prynne's 'referential integrity'—coherence rather than correspondence—seems wholly accurate. However, there are points in the poem which go beyond mere coherence, and which challenge us to make sense of their potential pragmatics. These are points at which the poem refers unambiguously to a communicative context on which the performance of the poem, as utterance, will rely, but to which the reader cannot gain access.

The points that cause most difficulty in this respect are not lexical items, nor cases of syntactic ambiguity, but the pragmatically defined shifters that are 'another' (l. 2) and 'here' (l. 24). How do we read these words? Do we have a choice? Consider the sequence 'another fire and pragma cape upon them both'. One can conjecture what 'fire and pragma cape' may mean—it has a phenomenological ring to it—but, beyond noting a play on 'magma', the reader is unlikely to feel much confidence in whatever working hypothesis he or she reaches. What, then, is to be done with the fact that the text presents us not simply with a 'fire and pragma cape', but with 'another fire and pragma cape'? 'Another' suggests that we have come across one of these capes before, while the syntax, which appears to be that of an absolute construction—'with a fire and pragma cape upon them both', the preposition being absent—, adds a further

degree of implicit familiarity with the material. The poem seems to encourage the reader not only to utter words that she or he does not understand—as, of course, does much poetry from childhood onwards—but to do so while claiming prior familiarity with previous occurrences of whatever they refer to, and with the significance of those occurrences to the communicative context of the utterance.

Such signalling of a familiarity with context would normally constitute a strong inducement to maximum reader engagement, and to the use of deaccenting to signal focus; and for several reasons, such a response seems likely here. The most probable candidate for deaccenting is 'another', the placing of which in focus would add relatively little to the utterance (save perhaps a certain weariness—*another* fire and pragma cape). The reader who responds to the text in this way will place 'another' in the prehead position and concentrate focus on the lexical items alone:

'bringing \<u>milk</u> in, | another 'fire and 'pragma 'cape

u'pon them \<u>both</u>; | [20]

It is certainly possible to choose not to deaccent 'another'—to adopt an intonationally conservative stance of reduced engagement, and thus accent everything regardless of considerations of focus:

| an'other 'fire and 'pragma 'cape

u'pon them \<u>both</u>; |

[20] The intonational scansion marks derive from J.C. Wells, *English Intonation: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). They are listed in the appendix to this article. Discussion of the potential and the limits of intonational scansion is contained in my 'Describing shape in the poetry of J.H. Prynne: rhythm and intonation in 'Again in the Black Cloud'", *Études britanniques contemporaines*, 39 (2011), in press.

Doing so, however, may give rise to a disappointing sense of being only minimally participant in the pragmatics of one's utterance.

Pragmatic considerations of this kind are reinforced by an attention to the poem's developing rhythms. Read with a high degree of engagement, and 'another' deaccented, the words 'fire and pragma cape upon them both' function as a five-beat metrical sequence stretching from lines 2 to 3:

'bringing \milk in, | another 'fire and 'pragma 'cape
B o B o] [B o B o B
u'pon them \both; |
o B o B]

The anacrustic 'another' gives rise to no beats. This five-beat pattern recalls l. 1, which is also very likely to be read as a five-beat:

At leisure for losing outward in a glazed toplight
o B -o- B o B ~o~ B ô B o

Echoes of this kind may provide a strong inducement to choose one rhythm over another. Read with less engagement, and an accent on the second syllable of 'another', the multiplicity of accents, and the regular alternation of accented and unaccented syllables, will make it difficult to find a satisfactory performance; the weight of the pause after 'in', and the uncertain metrical context, discourages a reading of l. 2 as a single metrical sequence, while the production of a six-beat sequence stretching from l. 2 to l. 3 may well be felt as giving too tum-ti-tum an effect:

'bringing \milk in, | an'other 'fire and 'pragma \cape |
B o B o] [o B o B o B o B
u'pon them \both; |
o B o B]

Should we seek to reduce our engagement with the pragmatics of this utterance, in other words, the metrics are there to coax us back towards them.

It is characteristic of Prynne's poetry to use of bursts of metricality to propel the reader over points of intonational indeterminacy. The poem's opening words, 'At leisure for losing outward', are typical in this respect: the metre relieves the reader of the need to use intonation to disambiguate syntax, since in a metrical context a reader will feel less need to use intonation in order to attach 'outward' either leftwards ('losing outward') or rightwards ('outward in a glazed toplight').[21] In the case of the 'pragma cape', the appeal of the metre, and the failure of a disengaged reading style to do justice to the pragmatics implicit in 'another', have the capacity, I think, to push the reader beyond the point at which intonational disengagement can be felt as a satisfactory response to the challenge of the poem. The reader of this poem may thus end up adopting a intonational stance that attempts to do justice to a momentarily assumed discourse context, but which is uneasily skewed in relation to his or her actual capacity to state how and what that context might be.

A related phenomenon occurs at the poem's end. The closing lines contain both metrical and non-metrical passages; the poem's final words, anaphoric and separated by commas, are very likely to be read as metrical, an emphatic sequence of beats separated by virtual offbeats:

Save whom
[O B
in fancy sent away, | both will do as if by choice |
o B o B o B] [B o B o b o B]
made ready by vocals. | Now 'washing the \<u>front</u> place |
o B -o- B o
\<u>quick</u>ly, | \<u>speak</u> to her: | on 'tap \<u>here</u>, | \<u>here</u>, | \<u>here</u>.
B [o] B [o] B

[21] Attaching it rightwards would require an intonation-group boundary after 'losing'; since fully metrical lines are in general relatively unlikely to include mid-line intonation-group boundaries when read aloud, the reader of this line has less need to decide whether to include one or not.

The reader does not know where 'here' is. He or she may speculate; in a poem in which milk figures strongly, in the context of a male gaze on what may be a naked female body, and in their immediate proximity to the words 'on tap', the three occurrences of 'here' might be understood as a reference to bodily fluids. However this is speculation; whatever context is imagined, and even whether or not a context is imagined, is likely to have little effect on the detail of the way in which the words are read aloud.

It is difficult to distinguish between degrees of engagement when the item in question so clearly points to an absent context. The pattern of prominences is imposed by the material; falling tones are denoted here as they seem particularly likely. What may vary is the tempo of the reading. The potential metricality of the 'here, here, here' triad functions as an inducement to the reader to time the three words relatively evenly such that their potential as a three-beat sequence can be realised; and this, in turn, encourages a strong sense of performative engagement with the words—much stronger than would be the case for a less rhythmically marked finale ('on tap here and here'). The sequence brings the sense that as reader one is participating in the elevation to rhetoricity and form of a shared discursive context that in reality one does not share at all. One can speculate about what 'here' refers to, but such speculation is secondary to the experience of actually saying the words aloud, and deriving pleasure from their articulation, while having no real confidence in the deixis whose mastery they imply.

The scansions offered in this discussion do not seek to clinch an argument as to how J.H. Prynne's poetry is or should be read; rather, to enable a greater attention to the detail of readers' performance decisions than is customarily afforded, to discuss what the parameters and choices implicit in such decisions may be, and to help the tools of scansion, pragmatics and discourse linguistics feed into broader critical discussion of the relationship of Prynne's poetry to questions

of speech, voice, and point of view. Some preliminary conclusions are nonetheless offered.

Firstly, that Prynne's late poetry does, in places, encourage its readers to occupy positions, and operate with reference to an imagined viewpoint and context. The purely text-internal model of reference proposed by John Wilkinson may correspond very well to the nature and the degree of engagement towards which Prynne's poetry manoeuvres its readers, but, just as at times readers of Prynne are induced to scale down their engagement in order to deal with challenging material, so at others they are encouraged by factors as diverse as deixis and metre to scale up their engagement, and draw on an imaginary discourse context.

Secondly, that such increases in engagement involve contexts to which readers do not have access—that is to say, which they cannot imagine with any degree of completeness or certainty—yet about which they are induced to sound authoritative. This acting-out of an perhaps impotent authority, via the reader's awkward identification with a partly-imagined utterance context, may be found an uncomfortable, but a distinctive experience, and one with its own unique compensations; for all its difficulty, 'The Stony Heart of Her' is a poem that can be returned to often for its particular mixture of intonational perplexity and rhythmical gusto. Such aspects of the poetry do not, of course, supplant its other qualities, but they are, I think, an important part of reading Prynne, and one that is sometimes underestimated—as, indeed, is the interest and importance of the theory of reading aloud. A belief in the power of competence alone has not proved adequate for phonology, and will not, I think, prove adequate for literary prosody or poetics – especially when the poetry at issue poses such unique challenges, and offers such unique pleasures, to performance.

Appendix: scansion marks

Metrical scansion marks (selected).
Source: Carper and Attridge, *Meter and Meaning*.

- emphasized beat (beat associated with a prominent syllable): B
- unemphasized beat (beat associated with a non-prominent syllable): b
- emphasized offbeat (offbeat associated with a prominent syllable): O
- unemphasized offbeat (offbeat associated with a non-prominent syllable): o
- double offbeat (offbeat associated with two syllables), neither syllable prominent: -o-
- triple offbeat (offbeat associated with three syllables): ~o~
- virtual offbeat (offbeat associated not with a syllable but with a break in the movement of a line): [o]
- implied offbeat (offbeat unassociated with any syllable or break in the movement of a line): ô

Intonational scansion marks (selected).
Source: Wells, *English Intonation*.

- intonation group boundary: |
- non-nuclear pitch accent: '
- nuclear tone: syllable underlined and preceded by one of following marks:
  - \ fall
  - / rise

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