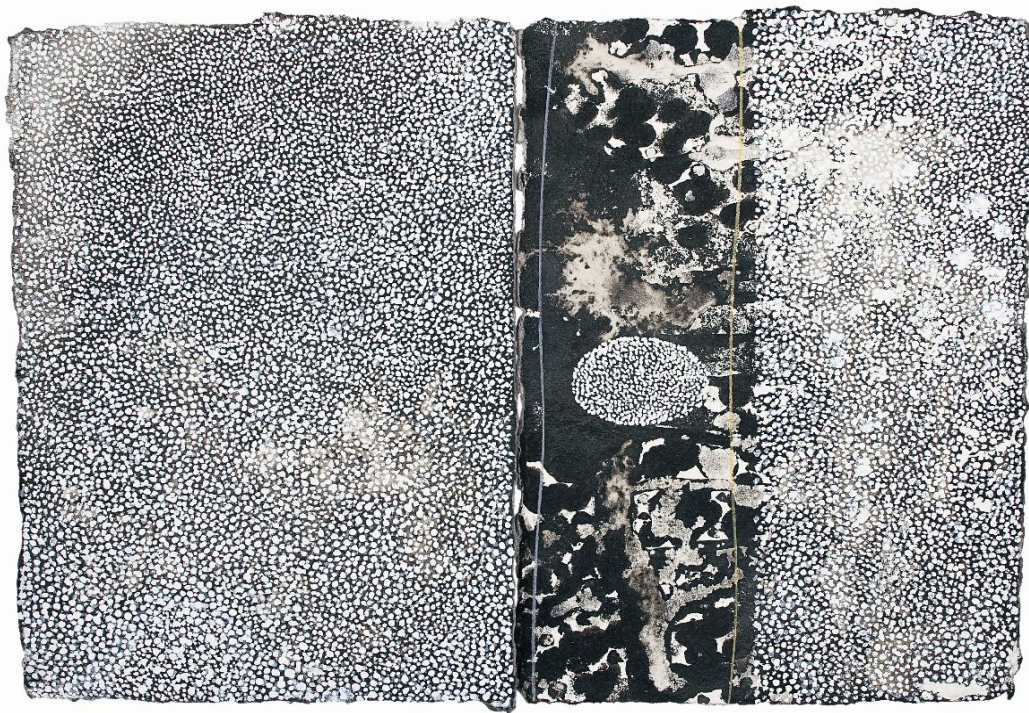


***Wound Response, Tacit Knowledge and Residual Reading:
Dissecting Matrices of Information in J.H. Prynne's Late-Modernist Poetry***

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The White Stones 2007-8
Ian Friend
Indian ink, gouache and crayon on Khadi paper
23 x 30 cm
Private collection, New York

Landing Area

The spirit is lame and in the pale flash
we see it unevenly spread with water. Lemon yellow
very still, some kind of bone infection, both
heroic and spiteful. Actually the arabs might
do well to soak up revenue on a straight purchase
of, say, Belgium. Make a new blood count,
more and more quietly, we change *daring* for
darling on the bypass. Still the sky is yellow and
completely with us, as if at birth. Is the throat
dry, no it is mine and lined with marrow;
bone on the other hand “can be here today
and gone tomorrow.” He was calm itself and
central to a scheme of virtue, not absent nor
wincing but his eye was as dry as the sky
was wet. And the sun set.

Standing before one of the gouache and indian ink works of Ian Friend, one notices the contrastive augmentation and overlaying of minute images that distend the printed object beyond any singular definition. The works in *The snowdrift line series* could easily represent a bodily structure reproduced by magnetic resonance imaging. Friend’s works detail objects as they flourish in a ‘pattern of indefinite growth.’¹ These works, which Friend has created in response to the poetry of J. H. Prynne, contain whole and fragmentary geometric shapes written over with an array of colour, in which increasing pixel mutation shrinks to a streaky cloudburst pattern. The resultant print is a synthesis of design and chance. Overlaying gouache smears give rise to natural illusion and depredation; the concept of the object appears as eroded by the artist.

In Prynne’s words, the images open “onto the shale and scree,” “down to the sparking riverbed,” onto the “road spilled with oil,” where the shadow is “driven up too far,” thus defacing the natural (217). The allusion of these works details a “starry and granular” image, an arbitrary expression of a body, or a landscape, whose design is effaced in slow decay (223). The organic process here represents Friend’s amorphous printing process which has developed as a constant reflection on Prynne’s poetics. To define *the snowdrift line* as representing the small crystals in the inner ear which allow the brain to detect the

¹ J. H. Prynne, *Poems / J.H. Prynne* (Fremantle, W.A. : Newcastle upon Tyne :: Fremantle Arts Centre Press ; Bloodaxe, 1999). 216. All successive quotations from 'Wound Response' will appear with pagination in parenthesis. Quotations from other poems will be so noted.

body's kinaesthetic position, allow small fractures of this image to develop. The works of both artists are seen as commentaries on the liminal thresholds of the human body.

This is the establishment of a deepening relation of images connecting body and mind, detailing the threshold of the personal, and the continuities between the interior and the exterior. The images of Friend's works land, "upon his lips curious white flakes, like thin snow," to "set damage control at the same white rate" (223). If the referential integrity of the body is detailed in the liminal division between internal and external, the image, denies the initial investigation towards a definite form and details the implosion represented by the minute divisions of capillary space, and delves into the cellular universes of the human body. Friend's images represent an aided perception of the internal space, just as the pure tones referenced in the epigraph to *Wound Response*, continually open the poem to macrocosmic potentialities. Friend's images, as Prynne once wrote, represent, "the history of person as an entire condition of landscape."²

In a long running correspondence between the Australian artist and the poet, Friend writes of his own collection that, "all of the works investigate the possibility of a metaphysical experience expressed through an abstract process. It is a diachronic body of work, the result of an allusive relationship of history, poetry, speculation, memory and reverie."³ The continual resistance of these artists to the idea of narrative is apparent in their works. Both artists, at times, "vigorously obstruct naturalisation, whether by putative context or internal coherence."⁴ In their correspondence, Prynne describes the expression of Friend's work as a 'tacit conversation rather than an overt illustration,' and this reference also implicates Prynne's processes of detailing the internal and external experience of the body, and using language as defined by these liminal boundaries.⁵

The complexity of Prynne's work is the result of his ambiguous representation of life as a conflux of images and lexical arrangements. Poet and critical theorist, Veronica Forrest-Thompson asserts that, "the constant movement from one implied external context to another does not allow consistent development of image-complexes over several lines; they appear momentarily only to disappear again."⁶ In *Wound Response*, the body forms an equationary system that is representative of the landscape, and through this metonymic device, details the relation of the human to society and the body to violence and external trauma⁷. In addition to this, Prynne creates a framework in which the body's reaction to a

² Ibid. This quotation is from 'First Notes on Daylight.' 69.

³ Ian Friend, *On Paper* (Brisbane: Andrew Barker Art Dealer, 2008). 7.

⁴ Larrissy, "Poets of a Various Art: J.H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Andrew Crozier." 69.

⁵ Friend, *On Paper*. References to letter from Prynne to Friend, dated 1 April 2001. 13.

⁶ Larrissy, "Poets of a Various Art: J.H. Prynne, Veronica Forrest-Thomson, Andrew Crozier." 70.

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary Online [Electronic Resource]*, (Oxford :: Oxford University Press, 2000). {NOTE:Metonymy: a. Rhetoric. (A figure of speech characterized by) the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it; an instance of this.

b. In extended use: a thing used or regarded as a substitute for or symbol of something else. Also (esp. in Linguistics and Literary Theory): the process of semantic association involved in producing and understanding a metonymy. }In the essay 'China Figures' Prynne extrapolates his own definition of the metonymic relationship to the following: "The systematic allusional framework of poetic figuration is a central characteristic to metonymy, as it has come recently to be regarded as a mode of composition controlled with metaphors; since a metonymic system

physiologic wound evokes the polyvalent connotations of a soldier experiencing harm in an act of war, the granular reaction of lignified tissue in a plant experiencing an incident of harm, and the hippocampus's overlaying reaction and denial of memory in moments of extreme trauma. *Wound Response* expresses details through and by all of these overlaying constructs. Prynne's lexical, historical, scientific, philosophic and poetic references add to the obfuscation of a singular identity within the poem. His poetry represents an experience of, and reaction to, the surrounding environment. Prynne's is a complex overlay of forms, thoughts, reactions, and philosophy which inform the possibilities of form and kinaesthetic representation found in Friend's works.

The proposition of reading a text with the multifaceted complexity of *Wound Response* forces the reader into a structural analysis of history, time, etymology, transcendental philosophy, prosody and the overlaying sources which compromise the authority of the written text. Each of Prynne's poems resist cohesive exaction and align themselves within the possibilities of expression. The Marxist literary theorist, and Cambridge Lecturer, Drew Milne, establishes the reading of Prynne within a definitive framework designed to extol implicit expressions of knowledge, as well as to enable the communication of tacit knowledge presented within the poem. Regarding Prynne's poetic works, he writes:

Language is understood as a condition of possibility rather than a site of communicative action. The decisive issue is whether the recognition of expressive contradictions can mediate its inclusion within determinate structures of communication and not remain trapped within the fundamental presuppositions of language which encode experience.⁸

The language used in *Wound Response* is an amalgamation of narrative, reflection, scientific data, counter-talk, and Druid symbology, all of which resists linguistic continuity. The resistance of the text to a cohesive read is further constrained by the reader's ability to disentangle the information presented and to place this information into recognisable and definitive structures of analysis which can thereby bring about a piecemeal understanding.

In *Distant Reading*, Peter Middleton writes that an analysis of a Prynne text should constitute a deconstruction of the text into smaller parts, which can then be cohesively arranged to form an understanding of the larger whole. In arguing for a distant reading Middleton has expressed that the comprehension of the poem should be a growing interpretation based on the accrual and accumulation of information. Middleton's assertion follows along the lines of Derrida's argument for a cognitive structure in literature. Derrida asserts that "the history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of metaphors and metonymies."⁹ In appealing to this structure, Middleton claims that:

depends on a pattern of figural components which are already associated together in the poetic discourse from which combination are produced each local part of such a system pre-implicating the larger whole."

⁸ Peter Middleton, *Distant Reading : Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*, Modern and Contemporary Poetics (Tuscaloosa :: University of Alabama Press, 2005). Milne essay, cited without reference by Middleton. 171.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London ; Melbourne :: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).353.

The interpretation of a poem of Prynne is a set of readings that are also complex actions, likely to include skimming, re-reading closely, reading just a few lines and remembering images and moods as well as lines or phrases, consequent discussion with others, ideas and expectations influenced by those readings as well as by mis-readings, partial attention, projection and the distortion of intense emotion.¹⁰

The interpretation upon which Middleton relies, stresses a reliance on the continued accumulation of information provided by a close reading of the text against etymologic, social, historic and metonymic systems to ascertain meaning. While this presentation parallels much of contemporary reading practice, the resultant is entirely dependent on the capacity and subjective inferences of the reader. While Middleton does allow for an interpretation based on misinformation, he does so in a manner which relegates the unknown facets of the poem to the basis of 'textuality', a condition of depth in the text, accessible to the reader only by means of a detailed analysis of poetic salience¹¹. A reading of the type Middleton suggests, because of its inability to present a view of the whole without a cohesive view of each part, precludes a cohesive understanding of the poem's propositional meaning, except by means of a residual reading. The treatment of Prynne's poems in a jigsaw pattern precludes the exposition of the intrinsic image and schema presented within the poem and therefore cannot detail a picture of the tacit knowledge which is being communicated.¹²

To amend this hole, this exegesis contends that concurrent with the structural analysis of the poem provided by the close reading, there is also a residual reading of the text, which represents the perceived images, ideas, phrases and assertions left with the reader after a completed reading of the poem¹³. In short, a reading of this type would represent the

¹⁰ Middleton, *Distant Reading : Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. 187.

¹¹ Ibid. 188.

¹² Anthony Mellors, "Mysteries of the Organism: Conceptual Models and J.H. Prynne's *Wound Response*," *A Salt Reader*. Mellors previously utilises the jigsaw analogy, though in his interpretation the explicit force with which the reader must attempt to bind the pieces to fit an incongruous 'gap' reveal the imposition of the will of the reader on the interpretation of the entire structure. This exegesis suggests that a residual reading undertakes to allow the reader a post-reading effect cognisant of the information exchanged through these 'gaps' in the cognitive structure of semantic and semiotic order.

¹³ John Kinsella and Matthew Hall, "Discussions Regarding Prynne and *Wound Response*," *Personal communication regarding exegesis, as developmental analysis of thesis work, through University of Western Australia*, (2008-2009). The definition of 'residual reading' in this exegesis bears a confluence to the ideas of Reception Theory, wherein the meaning of any given text is created between the reader and the text itself. For further readings see: Robert Holub's *Reception Theory: A Critical Introduction*. London: Methuen, 1984. For discourse on John's definition of 'residual reading', see the 213-221, *Disclosed Poetics*, as it relates to Kinsella's analogy of crop/weed-spraying and the resistance of this to the commonplace ethic of the pastoral. Here the residue is that which remains of attempts to 'control' the environment. Kinsella writes: "What is pivotal from a poetics perspective, which for me is inseparable from the ethical and pragmatic implications of this, is the corruption of any pastoral idyll. A negating or negative pastoral is part of late twentieth century English-language poetry, but the belief that such a negative pastoral is a denial of pastoral mores, should one remove the corrupting elements, is flawed" (Kinsella, 2007, p. 215. see also 'Shitheads of Spray' from *The New Arcadia*). The residue of this attempt to contain and control nature results in poison remnants filtering into the environment. As per correspondence, Kinsella has indicated the connotations of a 'residual reading' remain against the mannerisms of 'close reading' and derive much of the analogous implications from the transference of scientific knowledge to literary analysis. He relates his definition of 'residual reading' to: " 'what remains' after a reading of a poem [which] enlivens the reader to respond

proposed 'textuality' which Middleton argues as fundamental to the text. This post-reading, residual effect, is the aesthetic reaction of the reader to the displacement of subjectivity, and represents the reader's attempt to reconstitute meaning obscured by the vicissitudes of information. The creation and acknowledgement of the residual effects of the poem are fundamental aspects in generating an understanding of the tacit knowledge which Prynne imparts into every poem. Tacit knowing is a process of knowledge acquisition detailed by Michael Polanyi as representing a difficulty of transference, as tacit knowledge is subsidiary knowledge more often related to context, than explicit knowledge.¹⁴

It is the combination of this residual reading alongside of a structured, investigative, close reading of the text, through which the reader will begin to understand the potentialities of language and the interlacing metaphors and metonymies in the poem *Wound Response*. The poem represents a codification and articulation of tacit knowledge imparted alongside the explicit knowledge contained in the frameworks which direct meaning and interpretation. This allows a reading of the text which incorporates both a summary understanding of the particulars of language and the information presented, as well as a residual reading, which incorporates the foreknowledge that the poem expresses ideas which are tacit and undefinable. This method makes manifest the informational implications of the poem as well as the emotive and cognitive impact each poem expresses; an aspect which cannot be overlooked in war based poetry.

As a means of exemplifying the propensity of a residual reading and to demonstrate the exchange of tacit knowledge within the poem, a collated reading of the poem 'Landing Area' will be presented. 'Landing Area' is the seventh poem in *Wound Response* and, as indicated by the sequence of titles, appears after the wounded subject has received initial treatment and memory transmission therapy, though remains struggling with his wounds. The poem may also represent a new set of recruits heading in for their first landing in the war zone, uncertain of the definitive safety of the landing ahead. The landing area is in sight, and the opening lines appear without incident. The reader is looking down on a place where, "the spirit is lame and in the pale flash." The reader is injected into a scene of formidable density and which occupies a variety of landscapes, where geographic, biologic and idiolectical polysemy simultaneously form collated yet divergent discourses.¹⁵ The first allusion to come out of this line, and the most easily recognisable, is a parallel to the phrase 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.' Through this line Prynne negates acts of will and denotes them as actions carried out under force and coercion. With 'the pale flash,' Prynne might initially be drawing the reader's attention outside of the plane, to a series of small explosions appearing on the horizon. At this point in *Wound Response*, the reader will have a definitive understanding about being

to other readings in particular ways" (Hall, Kinsella. 11.05.09). In the analytic response to war, the residual reading works against the direct propaganda of war. Effectively the residual reading works to subversively importune a message to the reader that is not explicitly taken as propaganda and can bypass instances of resistance. An understanding of the effect of residual reading allows Prynne's war based poetry to take the position of propaganda without explicitly being identified as such (Hall, Kinsella. 11.05.09).

¹⁴ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, N.Y. :: Doubleday, 1967). Chapter One, 'Tacit Knowing' establishes the definition as it is used in this exegesis.

¹⁵ Middleton, *Distant Reading : Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry*. 187.

emerged in the context of war, and therefore an understanding that this 'Landing Area' is in the middle of a war zone.

Prynne's linguistic play on the phrase *pale flesh*, contextualises the subject as a specimen, a figure being reported on with medical precision. The reader experiences the detached, diagnostic inquiry of the doctor asking: "Is his throat dry?" Perhaps it is a further symptom sustained as a result of the spreading "bone infection", which was meticulously documented as being, "heroic and spiteful." The preliminary lines allow the reader to conclude that s/he is entering a densely compact area, and circumstance which change with each successive word. Reeve and Kerridge insist that, in this poem, "the subject is disrupted by the shifts and by the absorption of the human body in larger processes, biologic and economic."¹⁶ The frameworks of semantic implication and linguistic innovation, compress potentialities of individual lines to the point where, "there is not the time and space for the radically divergent discourses and scales to be demarcated and to stand off from each other."¹⁷

Forcing the reader to face the exploratory nature of the internal body incited by the medical diagnostics, conditionally and temporally, situates the reader amongst the overlaying images of the poem, and forces the reader into a dissection and analysis of the individual, fragmentary parts.¹⁸ A reading of the salience of the poem, lies not in the analysis of individual images or phrases, but in the complicit manner in which these fragments interrelate. Reeve and Kerridge argue that the overheard direction to, "Make a new blood count," situates the reader as a member of medical staff, assisting in the ongoing procedure, ensuring that the subject is "still completely with us."¹⁹ The lines of the poem accelerate and the images pile up and force greater collisions in time and space. The 'Landing Area' approaches as the tension of the lines rise. The reader is the wounded subject, an occupant in the scene examining the wounded body with detailed, pathological precision, as well as an omniscient passenger awaiting a potentially treacherous landing.

The plot moves faster, words and their semantic and subjective implications pile up. This tension has forced the need for a "bypass." Reeve and Kerridge write that this operation describes, "the circumventing of an arterial blockage [which] becomes a similar manoeuvre in an external landscape. The suburban familiarity of the 'bypass' offsets the unfamiliarity of the body considered in material terms which tend only to be confronted in emergencies."²⁰ The demarcations between the self and the subject lose their structural strength and the tensions of a rapidly approaching death force the alteration of the poem from an individual account to a third-person narrative, related in the past tense. The subject within the poem wavers, as Prynne, "extend[s] the play between subjectivity and its opposites; [where] the pathos of the birth process of conviction is shadowed by

¹⁶ N. H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much : The Poetry of J.H. Prynne* (Liverpool :: Liverpool University Press, 1995). 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 22.

¹⁹ Note: Prynne directs a great amount of complicity onto the reader, who is addressed as an associate member of staff in the medical examination, and therefore responsible for the preservation of the subject's life. This is a particularly strong representation of a guilt mechanism imbuing the reader the position of complicity in the subject's struggle to survive.

²⁰ Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much : The Poetry of J.H. Prynne.* 22.

something which threatens both to complete and extinguish it, an implausible and enviable marginality.”²¹ In ‘Landing Area’, the subject’s movement between life and death deliberately marginalises his position, ridding him of all faculty and power and leaves his life in the hands of others, thus replicating the thematic devices of Wordsworth’s marginalised beggars.²²

Prynne engages with lyrical traditions by equating the relation of the sun to birth (of the subject or disease, he does not specify), and by concluding the poem with “And the sun set” implies a death, both figurative and literal, and a drastic change to come. Prynne adds in the ironic comment that even bone, “can be here today and gone tomorrow.”²³ The politics of this poem lie buried beneath the overlaying matrices of image, and semantic and semiotic definition, visible in the gaps of presence which reflect the yellow sky. Is this the colour of napalm hanging in the air? Or is this the destruction of the landscape by fire which taints the sky? Collating instances of war within the sensory data, Prynne implies that political regimes, “can be here today and gone tomorrow.” The impetuous nature of social change also references the occupational forces implicated in the Vietnam and Korean wars. Also alluded to here is Olson’s idea that, “what does not change is the will to change;”²⁴ a theoretical idea which Prynne has destroyed in the first line of ‘Landing Area’, by stating that acts of will are no longer possible as “The spirit is lame,” and the flesh weak. Prynne’s initial refutation of acts of will and the materiality of the subject, lying near death on an operating table, undermines the agency of the individual. The elegiac calm with which the poem concludes references the death of the individual soldier, the subject who was stuck fighting in an idealistic war. In these final lines Prynne also makes a moral stand against Pound’s triumphing of Mussolini and Italian fascism, arguing that the death of the subject is all that will result from the despotic wars of ideology, and fascist rule.

‘Landing Area,’ contains the directive, almost farcical, line which states, “Actually the arabs should soak up revenue on a straight purchase of, say, Belgium.” Reeve and Kerridge situate this line parenthetically, by writing that: “*Wound Response* appeared in

²¹ Blyth Caroline, "Language and Subjectivity: The Darkling Thrush and the Golden Bird," *Critical Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2003). Noted by Blyth from David Trotter's *The Making of the Reader* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 223.

²² William Wordsworth, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. John Butt and A. Norman Jeffares, New Oxford English Series (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). 76. 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'. and 143 'Beggars' for an account of marginalised subjectivity as it is depicted herein. The subjectivity of the wounded soldier is increasingly restricted, his agency is whittled to nothingness. There is no alternative left but constitution of the self through an outward attack, thus redefining the agency of continuous present self. This is "an occasion that might seem to be one of heightened subjectivity and self-absorption [that] can also involve a tacit contact with other forces, inimical or sympathetic, which in their otherness proclaim the continuing existence of alternative concerns and priorities to those the cry is emphasizing and offer the beginnings of a scrutiny of the subject at the very moment [the traumatic instant] when it might imagine itself most immune" (Reeve and Kerridge, 52). For the wounded soldier as well as Wordsworth's beggars there is a disruption of subjectivity which occurs through marginalisation, wounding and the bombardment of physical violence. The subject in both instances is held at a threshold which is physically distancing. This marginalisation, is also reflective of the wounded combatants, as they are physically insulated from their victims, and insulated further from the circumstances of war by the dictates of their vantage. The formation of subjectivity, in such a case is exemplified by the manner in which the subject interrelates to the environment through the self-establishment at the nodal points of communication. Thus the top-down control of information received by the wounded soldier represents an inarticulate subjectivity.

²³ Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much : The Poetry of J.H. Prynne*. 23.

²⁴ Charles Olson et al., *Collected Prose* (Berkeley :: University of California Press, 1997). 246.

1974, a year after the oil embargo which threw the Western European economies into crisis.”²⁵ As the reader’s engagement with the action continues to rapidly expand outward, from the body being examined to the landscape, the disruption of ideological means is replaced by a staunch materiality. Exchange and divisions of material goods and subjectivity remain the confronting and foregrounding subjects of investigation of the residual read of the poem.

Material wealth and, as Prynne predicts, oil, will become the only substances worth fighting for. Ideologies, just as the human subject or the wounded soldier, “can be here today and gone tomorrow;” their worth never materialises. The poem has a conciliatory end, “his eye was as dry as the sun was wet. And the sun set.” The plane has finally landed. The reader reacts, thankfully, if only for a moment, until the reality of landing in a war zone makes its implications fully realised. The irony of the quietude in which the poem ends, is its rejection of “the notion of the poem as a consolatory space in which unity, proportion and reconciliation are available [. . .] Prynne makes this rejection on the site of one of the most important traditional humanist functions of poetry, the function of reconciling people to the idea of death.”²⁶ Prynne’s rejection of the safety of any person in the war displays an attitude of utter contempt towards the war makers, and their materialist and ideological zeal. War, he implies, destroys every individual through societal complicity, whether actively engaged in the fighting or not. Prynne’s implication of guilt is not explicit in the poem, as guilt too, is a matter of syntax, and the poem works to, “deplete the input of ‘blame’” (223). The poem continues to follow the soldier even, “where there is calamitous groaning,” and the wounded subject, “falls and lies in the street, wretchedly holding his mouth,” as he, “pitch[es] furtively,” in the street; the reader cannot escape the atrocities and horrors of war, despite the syntactic lessening of his guilt (227).

Prynne’s late-modernist writing places itself at the cusp that transgresses against traditional representations of knowledge and creates from the poem an open field of inquiry. In separate arguments, Adorno states that: “form [is] the sediment of content”; and that, “form seeks to bring the particular to speech through the whole”.²⁷ Both of these statements parallel Olson and Creely’s thought that, “form is never more than an extension of content,”²⁸ and thereby an examination of this form can produce meaning. For Prynne, the meaning of any given text is defined through examination and reflection by the reader on his or her relation to the world. It is not the physical form, but the relation the author establishes with the external world which formally situates the subjective, and defines the text. Early on, Prynne defined this intent: “It has 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 usages; and thereby with the reader’s own position within this world”.²⁹ This assertion argues that beyond the relatively static sphere of informational derived analysis and the self-generative criticism of a number of Cambridge based critics, there is a relation established between the reader and the poem.

²⁵ Reeve and Kerridge, *Nearly Too Much : The Poetry of J.H. Prynne*. 21.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 24.

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno et al., *Aesthetic Theory* (London :: Athlone Press, 1997). Quotations from page 202 and 190, respectively.

²⁸ Olson et al., *Collected Prose*. 138.

²⁹ J.H. Prynne, "A Letter to Peter Riley 15/9/1985," *In lit* 1992 (1992).

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