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POTENTIALITY OF POETIC THOUGHT: J. H. PRYNNE'S *SUB SONGS*

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ABSTRACT

The present article explores J. H. Prynne's 2010 collection *Sub Songs* and its employment of what Prynne terms poetic thought, a capacity of language to contest its own reification in the process of permanent contradiction within lexis. Setting *Sub Songs* against the context of Prynne's other writings, both poetical and critical, the essay argues that the poems in the volume set out to challenge received modes of thinking about truth and freedom. This is done through what is here termed directed potentiality, understood as these poetic texts' evocation of shifting constellations of possible meanings, whose openness, however, is directed at critically evoking certain problematic aspects of the world through such means as the repetition of lexical items as well as intertextual and sonic allusiveness. It is by using this technique that *Sub Songs* critiques mendacious linguistic practices, which inform the crises of interpersonal commitment and intellectual stupor that the world as evoked in *Sub Songs* is fraught with.

Keywords: J. H. Prynne; experimental poetry; poetic thought; critique; potentiality.

1. Introduction

Although his work has long been noted for its formal difficulty, J. H. Prynne insists that one constant of his compositional practice is a commitment to the world in hand. In a 2016 interview, he points out that "poets had better be clear about where their allegiances lie, because otherwise they're going to go sailing off into an empyrean, which is a luxury they should never afford themselves" (Dolven & Kotin 2016: 200). In preference to lofty rhetorical and philosophical aspirations, for Prynne, the role of poetry is to interrogate the woes of its time and seek ways of energising language so that it might evade "sailing off into the empyrean" or defaulting to the received modes of thinking. With this point in mind, in the present article, I concentrate on Prynne's 2010 *Sub Songs* in order to show how

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the poems collected in the volume composed at the height of the economic crisis in Europe bring into focus the perversions of economic destitution and ethical duplicity.

Sub Songs, which dropped the form of the long poem that Prynne had consistently utilised since *Unanswering Rational Shore* (2001) and returned to in his subsequent volume *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is* (2011), offers some of Prynne's most radically experimental work. Continuing the intensive use of parataxis and anacolutha as well as scant observance of the rules of English syntax, *Sub Songs* pushes the limits of expressivity by creating what will here be called spaces of directed potentiality of meaning-production. The idea centres on the fact that the texts of these poems offer shifting constellations of possible meanings, whose openness, however, is directed at critically evoking certain problematic aspects of the world through such means as the repetition of lexical items as well as intertextual and sonic allusiveness. In effect, Prynne's poetic is no exercise in discontinuity and fragmentation for their own sake but rather an attempt to conjure internal tensions that initiate the work of what he calls poetic thought.

2. Demands of poetic thought

In "Huts", a meditation on the intricate assembly of meanings that have accrued to the image of the hut in the English language, its daily use and poetic tradition alike, over the last several centuries, Prynne concludes by giving a "prototype early modern hut":

> [T]imber-framed and clad with light planks or other local materials, to provide basic shelter, to allow outward watchfulness (originally of grazing animals), in distant or non-social locations, often at language-margins, with a low-raked roof and window-spaces and one door, not a dwelling and not set up for family life but estranged from it and its domestic values. The very ikon of temporary or intruded fabrication, often dark, an intense feature in relation to landscape and territory.
> (Prynne 2008: 629)

This evocation leads him to ask: "Where in the mental imagery of modern life have we seen such structures?" At this point, though, the answer is transparent: "Raised up on wooden gantry supports, these [huts] are the watchtowers of divisive and punitive regimes" that separated the two Germanies or the ones established on the perimeter of "the final-solution camps during the Third Reich". Furthermore, they could be the Stalinist "huts" of the deportation and death camps or "the shanty-settlements of desperate refugee populations and casualties of war" (Prynne 2008: 629). Finally, they could be the surveillance posts raised "at the entry to Camp Delta of the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay"

(Prynne 2008: 630). The hut refers also to a tree house erected for the merry delight of our children or a shack deep in the woods where, according to the brothers Grimm, the witch dwells.

The essay is the first in a series of Prynne's written texts and lectures that pave the way for the idea of poetic thought as a distinct manner in which intellect operates in the act of perusing as well as writing an innovative poem. Granted that poets help us realise what world we live in and "how we may dwell not somewhere else but where we are" (Prynne 2008: 631–632), one of the tasks that Prynne appoints to them is the maintenance of awareness of misuses of power and linguistic duplicity, including too quick an employment of irony as a means to destabilising the teleological process of meaning construal.[2] He further probes the notion of poetic thought in a 2010 essay of the same title, a text to some extent corrective of the postulates of "Huts". There, he argues that "poetic thought is brought into being by recognition and contest with the whole cultural system of a language, by argument that will not let go but which may not self-admire or promote the idea of the poet as arbiter of rightness" (Prynne 2010b: 598). For the work to be complete, the poet must "self-remove" so that the poem can be tested against the material reality. As Prynne argues, "to work with thought requires the poet to grasp at the strong and persistent ways in which understanding is put under test by imagination as a screen of poetic conscience, to coax and hurl at finesse and judgement, and to set beliefs and principles on line, self-determining but nothing for its own sake merely; all under test of how things are" (Prynne 2010b: 597). Rather than promulgate opinions,[3] the poet is to initiate the compositional process whereby language sets itself to investigate its own reification and deformation, for "a discourse practice defaults in a wink to facile acceptance of the commonplace, to bending compliantly under commercial or political distortions, to accommodate by self-corruption" (Prynne 2010b: 598). In Prynne's view, the poem stands in constant strife with the discursive practice of the time, assuming the role of a tool in the process of challenging the reification of words.

In *Concepts and Conception in Poetry* (2014), Prynne further observes that patterns of language use, which determine the circulation of knowledge, turn into conceptual schemes, which he defines as "structures of mental procedures or

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2 In an exchange of letters with the poet Drew Milne, Prynne observes that "the perils of irony are more severe than the risks of misconstruction, because even as a latent first stage in the argument of contradiction there's a duplicity about ironic devices" (Prynne & Milne 1993: 57–58).

3 In the interview, Prynne remarks that "every time some grand poet shot his mouth off – or hers – about some issue of the day, they talked such nonsense with such grave and ridiculous confidence that it struck me as a terrible career option, to be consulted as a poet about matters of moment" (Dolven & Kotin 2016: 193).

representations" comprising concepts understood as "mental construct[s] related to idea, notion, etc." (Prynne 2014: 13). Such schemes are historically constructed, "some … occur fleetingly as temporary aspects of a thought-process, and some persist as mental patterns or characteristics that can be durable, capable of being retrieved from memory, worked out and set down in discursive expression". These "creeds and covenants, legal jurisdictions and moral or political schemes of conduct" (Prynne 2013: 13) with time become subject to reification unless, as he has it in "Huts", they are constantly kept "under test of how things are". If our perception of reality is filtered through the conceptual schemes currently in operation, poetry is best equipped for probing those schemes' applicability to how things are because it is marked with "a heightened sense of the accumulated layers and aspects of association which form the significatory resonance of previous usage" (Prynne 1993: 18).[4] Given that it utilises the whole history of language for its purposes, poetry, as Prynne states in "Mental Ears", "comprises at its most fully extended an envelope which finds and sets the textual contours in writing of how things are; while also activating a system of discontinuities and breaks which interrupt and contest the intrinsic cohesion and boundary profiles of its domain" (Prynne 2010a: 126). Thus, predicated on the tension between the extant conceptual schemes and the forces of disruption and defamiliarisation intrinsic to language, poetry destabilises the vocabularies used for ordering the world about us and, as a result of this destabilisation, revises our relationship with how things are.

Prynne's intensive engagement with what poetry is and how it works coincides with the composition of *Sub Songs*. The collection features nine poems in a large-format book, which contrasts with his earlier collections that tended to rely on small-size editions. The poems bear all the hallmarks of Prynne's impenetrable poetics: a frequent use of anacolutha, an abjuration of syntax, a division into stanzas of variable verse length, ranging between four and eleven, differing in syllable count and marked by occasional indentation of first lines; additionally, each poem consists of longer-line stanzas set off against shorter middle sections that comprise from two to as many as six stanzas. At first glance, the shorter stanzas offer a kind of commentary to the longer ones, suggesting the classical division into *epeisodion* and *stasimon*, although this neat distinction is problematised by the texts' semantic complexity that cannot be easily tabulated into such binary schemes. And yet, the first-glance effect is that of an apparent order and precision, as the visual aspect of the poems as well as of the entire collection (the simple dark green

[4] It is with that postulate in mind that Simon Jarvis argues that "readers [of Prynne] are asked to become researchers, to take purchase on the whole body of the language and the history and polity sediment within it" (Jarvis 1991: 70).

cover with the title and the poet's name placed in a white box surrounded by a red frame coming in the middle) suggests stability and gravitas.

However, this initial aura of stark simplicity is challenged, as the poems refuse to yield what might be termed a coherent meaning. In line with Prynne's critique of "the intrinsic cohesion and boundary profiles" of conceptual schemes that determine our perception of the world, *Sub Songs* demands from us constant interpretive swerves and the ability to juggle various potential contexts and signifying possibilities just to keep up with the plurality of meanings that arise from the arrangement of the texts of individual poems. Still, as I argue here, it is in its fluidity and seeming disorganisation that *Sub Songs* comes to contest ossified conceptual schemes. For rather than endorsing some agendas alternative to such current ideologies as capitalism or individualism, the poems create the space of potentiality in which language is organised through constellating words, images and ideas into dynamic tensions that ignite poetic thought.

3. The poem as a space of potentiality

Keston Sutherland reads *Sub Songs* as a poetic instantiation of Prynne's insistence that poetic thinking can only happen when the subject is overcome. He claims that "for Prynne the subject is what must be let go if truth, whose most important form is poetic thought, is to be heard. The subject is a kind of manager (it is 'in charge'), an excrescence of consciousness that must be shed for poetic thought to be cohered into" (Sutherland 2014: 130). The structure of the subject that according to Sutherland emerges in *Sub Songs*, unlike in for example *Brass* (1971) or *Down Where Changed* (1979), is characterised by "indolence in the face of social injustice" (Sutherland 2014: 131), so that laziness "is the whole extent and action of the subject in all its shapes, and only when the subject is extinguished, not when it quiets down and defers to its opposite, will poetry fulfil its duty and destiny to generate poetic truth" (Sutherland 2014: 140). In Sutherland's reading, *Sub Songs* derogates the subject as an indolent product of a reified language so that the poems set out to unravel the perversions of ethics and the calcified discourse of profit-obsession. And yet, there is more at stake in the collection, as it seeks to put forth an alternative mode of thinking, the Prynnean poetic thought, that will maintain the movement of ideas in a dialectic tension. Thus, the poems do not articulate notions or put forth theses, operating instead at the level of potentiality as they set up a ground where thought can germinate in direct opposition to received modes of understanding.

The idea of potentiality is implicit already in the title of the volume. It alludes to an ornithological term "sub-song", which denotes a fledgling bird's "song of low volume" that includes "all performances which are so inwardly or faintly

uttered that they do not carry to anywhere near the distance over which the bird is physically capable of making itself heard" (Thorpe & Pilcher 1958: 509). This definition by British ornithologists W. H. Thorpe and P. M. Pilcher is likely to have attracted Prynne, who worked at Cambridge at the same time as Thorpe. According to the two ornithologists, sub-songs, particularly in the chaffinch, unlike "the true song [that] consists of a well-defined burst of sound lasting, on the average, between two and three seconds and repeated at intervals of about 20 seconds, the sub-song consists of an irregular and indefinite series of notes continuing for perhaps half a minute or more, although broken up into ill-defined phrases each lasting for perhaps two or three seconds" (Thorpe & Pilcher 1958: 510). The relevance of the ornithological term for Prynne's collection lies in the association with the bird's song's "irregular and indefinite series of notes" that are "broken up into ill-defined phrases", for the two features – the irregular notes and ill-defined phrases – capture what seem to be key aspects of the poems in *Sub Songs*: their prosody, which is variable, albeit held within boundaries of similarity, and the arrangement of the lines into strings of anacolutha.

"As Mouth Blindness", the opening poem of the collection whose title alludes to the inability to tell tastes as a result of radiation therapy, focuses on sound in the first part of its second stanza:

> Promote by alarm not shouted yet
> for note forgather, all fair in fear addressed, in train it may
> be terminal antic to ready hold. Read the data, cramp tremble
> in the jaw, parted tongue. …
>
> (Prynne 2010: 5)

The sonic orchestration of the fragment emphasises slow-paced reading, with iambs and anapaests responsible for the meditative diction, while the alliterated fricative in the second line adds quite some intensity, thereby quickening the pace of delivery. The tension in the pace of the fragment results in the irregularity and indefiniteness of the stanza's music: the reading is propelled into an iambic mellowness only to be jolted by the sudden interruption of the alliterative line, which is then brought under the control of an almost thoroughly iambic subsequent line. Such dynamism of the sonic texture of the fragment, also present in other poems of the volume, offers an equivalent of the "alarm not shouted yet" in that the alarm, implied at the level of sound by the repetition of the fricative /f/, never fully registers, cramped by the otherwise hushed iambic-anapaestic rhythm.

On the other hand, the swerve-inciting anacolutha, which Prynne's oeuvre abounds in and "As Mouth Blindness" employs generously, represent the "ill-defined phrases" of the sub-song. In the above-quoted stanza, the first verse is a straightforward imperative but the following line, even though it seems to continue the sentence, does not match it syntactically. Moreover, "for note

forgather" is isolated from the subsequent phrase, "all fair in fear addressed", which in itself offers no clear connection with the previous part of the sentence. While the lines embody the alarmist sonic intensity, semantically they point to a number of possibilities: there is the already-mentioned alarm but also a disembodied address to a frightened group, all of whom within it appear to share something, which is indicated by the inclusion of "in train" followed by "it may / be". It is just that the verb "be" does not constitute the end of the sentence, as one would expect it to, but rather leads to "terminal antic to ready hold". The suggestion of possibly pernicious play implicit in "terminal antic" adds danger to the above list of emotions and ideas that the fragment evokes. Finally, the allusion to Milton's "Lycidas", where "the poet criticizes the 'Blind mouths'" (Noel-Tod 2013: 116), points to the outrage at the inability to spotlight and appropriately respond to the economic destitution and deepening individual and national debt in the wake of the 2008 fiscal crisis.

The implications of the crisis, which began with the collapse of the US housing market brought to a head by borrowers' inability to pay their instalments, lurk in the phrase "nothing not due" (Prynne 2010: 5); the logic of the phrase, highlighted by the use of the double negative, is that everything is due and there is no ownership.

If bird song is conventionally taken to represent poetry of the highest order, an association made regularly in Romanticism, then sub-song represents its dialectic counterpart. As one of Prynne's poems puts it: "single glance ill / ascends all yet higher and streaming bird-like, for rounding cant / stick dementive and back block' (Prynne 2010: 9). The allusion to Shelley's "To a Skylark" is all too clear: "Higher still and higher / From the earth … springest / Like a cloud of fire; / … / And singing still dost soar, and soaring ever singest" (Shelley 2011: 471). But whereas Shelley is attracted to the skylark's fully-fledged song, which implies a disembodied beauty of perfect expression that "we feel that it is there," for Prynne, such a view of poetry, "hidden / In the light of thought" (Shelley 2011: 471), represents "rounding cant", nothing more than "Puff creamy delusion" (Prynne 2010: 10). Prynne expounds on his opposition to the Romantic quest for the ideal, remarking in the interview, "I found myself resentful about [German and British Romantic] idealism, partly because it philosophically and theoretically no longer seemed to command my loyalties, and partly because it was a very expensive dodge that provokes a great deal of trouble in thinking clearly about the world situation. These comfortable middle-class values assume loyalty to an accepted class structure which by clear implication denies shared social justice to large segments of the planetary population" (Dolven & Kotin 2016: 200). In a similar vein, rather than emphasise order and perfection, like in Keats's nightingale or Shelley's skylark, Prynne's sub songs highlight

incompleteness and indeterminacy as part of a commitment to social justice. As a result, these sub-song qualities are not ends unto themselves, as fragmentation and dispersal of meaning are engaged in constant tension with the insistence on the directionality of the poems' potential for critiquing ossified conceptual schemes, which is invoked through such means as lexical and sonic recurrence, stanzaic patterning and occasional declarative clarity.

This implementation of potentiality with a view to challenging passive acceptance of the status quo and at the same time promoting the operation of poetic thought is at full display in the volume's middle poem, "Thus to Look". Its title alludes to Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight", in which the speaker regards his infant child fondly and rejoices at the prospect of a life that his child will have: "it thrills my heart / With tender gladness, thus to look at thee, / And think that thou shalt learn far other lore, / And in far other scenes" (Coleridge 1999: 210). Unlike the poet who "was reared / In the great city", his son will be weaned in a natural habitat and "see and hear / The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / Of that eternal language, which thy God / Utters" (Coleridge 1999: 210). Coleridge's hopeful conviction is challenged in "Thus to Look", which picks up some of the threads of "Frost at Midnight" but jettisons the optimistic resolve.

The intensive use of strings of modal verbs in Prynne's poem – especially at the end of the first stanza: "may not for that astonish should may not either way" (Prynne 2010: 18) – implies a lack of conviction that the opening of "Thus to Look" associates with some form of prevarication: "Truth to tell if not maybe" (Prynne 2010: 18). Telling the truth is here a matter of conditionality and modality, which the poem suggests is tantamount to self-congratulatory complaisance: "In the garden for bidden a turn, for you both readily / agree to mutual verified limit of glad principle, ever / never before give to take foremost attractive or wise" (Prynne 2010: 18). The image of the garden is accompanied throughout the poem with invocations of parks, "the dark path" and a "shadow / on the pathway", all of which are underlain with the biblical connotations of the Garden of Eden and "the land of the shadow of death" from Psalm 23. Furthermore, if there is nature in "Thus to Look", it is by no means the Coleridgean "lovely shapes" but rather a dark, man-controlled place (a park rather than the "lakes and sandy shores" of Coleridge) where the poem's addressees, "you both", dwell, contentedly accepting the "mutual verified limit of glad principle". Whereas Freud's "pleasure principle" represents the instinctual avoidance of pain, the "glad principle" implies a mutually-felt contentment that accepts the limit of a status quo.

This acceptance of a pleasant but passive existence is ultimately dismissed, as the conclusion of the first stanza of "Thus to Look" opts for a more critical attitude: "on proof for dissentient flagrancy, ambient tribute" (Prynne 2010: 18). The contrast between the consent to the "limit of glad principle" on the one hand

and "dissentient flagrancy" on the other constitutes one of the central tensions in the poem, as it goes on to denounce the passive endorsement of self-congratulatory meekness and urges that "you both" "Diverge towards both parts" and advises "Don't fear more the way not clear never so as felt now" (Prynne 2010: 18). The summons to take "the way not clear" seems to encourage "you" to give up their cosy lives and adopt a more radical attitude (which in the world evoked in "Thus to Look" appears to be an offence, as implied by "dissentient flagrancy"), an idea that associates with the "grand esperance" (Prynne 2010: 18) that the poem mentions earlier.

And yet, "Thus to Look" refrains from a simple recommendation how to lead a better life, as the above line of argument is destabilised not only by the paratactic opaqueness but also by lexical ambiguity. Prynne's compositional method, preferring repetition of words or deployment across the space of the poem of scattered terms from related conceptual schemes over observing the rules of grammar, is here further problematised. In the shorter interlude stanzas, the poem strikes a hopeful note: "The next / place of care / is for sake / allow forth with stay lightly / in daze at grand esperance" (Prynne 2010: 18). When seen on the page, the lines imply an allocation to those in need of some "place of care", which might well be the reason for the later "grand esperance." However, when the line is read out loud "for sake" is more likely to register as "forsake", the verb used earlier in the poem to suggest one's abandonment on "the dark path" (Prynne 2010: 18). In effect, "The next / place of care" becomes associated with the act of giving up or leaving behind, in which case one is "in daze" because the promise of a new place of rest or recuperation is simultaneously proffered and withdrawn. A similar ambiguity registers in "allow forth with" in that "forth with" might be a throwback to the Middle English "forth mid", meaning "along with", but in oral delivery it becomes the adverb "forthwith". The permission is therefore either granted to a group, perhaps the "you both" from earlier in the poem, or it is an instantaneous act that allows one to "stay lightly / in daze", even though the omission of the full infinitive creates a gap between "allow" and "stay", leaving them connected notionally, if not grammatically.

The lexical ambiguity in "Thus to Look", which plays the written text against its oral performance, sets up what Theodor Adorno would call a negative dialectic, whereby two or more mutually-exclusive or contradictory ideas, trains of thought and ultimately two or more interpretations are held in balance, neither accepted nor fully discarded. In Prynne's poem, as well as throughout *Sub Songs*, this instantiation of negative dialectic creates the space of indeterminacy in which meanings are both conjured and disarticulated, existing in perpetual potentiality. Still, "Thus to Look" is no mere metapoetic flourish but rather the poem uses potentiality to suggest that this "way not clear" is one possible response to our readiness to be content with the "glad principle".

By keeping us in a state of heightened intellectual alertness, "Thus to Look" not only declares how thinking should be done but also impels us to practice it. It is in this sense that poetic thought is instantiated in the poem but also across the remainder of *Sub Songs*, for the act of reading of the poem becomes an exercise in thinking in terms of potentiality. While on the one hand the poem brings in an identifiable set of meanings through the repetition of vocabulary, emphasising certain lines of thinking, on the other, the semantic field of the text remains riddled with tensions, as words come into emergent constellations that never ossify into concrete concepts.

The critical application of potentiality as the practice of poetic thought lies in the fact that it compels the reader to abandon the oft-rehearsed modes of interpretation of the poem but also of ideas in general and accept the shifting grounds from which meanings arise and dissolve simultaneously. In "Thus to Look", those meanings oscillate around the hope for a better life for "you both" but the ambiguities instilled by the tension between the written word and its sound thwart our attempts at making the poem cohere into a self-contained whole. Indeed, throughout *Sub Songs*, the operation of poetic thought is often employed as a counter to mendacious, reified logic that the collection frequently associates with capitalist profit obsession that entails the perversion of ethics.

4. Profit obsession

In his earlier work, Prynne suggests that one of the less expected deleterious outcomes of the capitalist economy is its impact on the way language is used, specifically in its emphasis on the importance of the quick and uninterrupted exchange of information.[5] An early poem like "Sketch for a Financial Theory of the Self" (from *Kitchen Poems* (1968)) focuses on the need for the name to retain some essential link with the world, even though the object of this need is, in fact, money as a token of value: "the absurd trust in value is the pattern of / bond and contract and interest – just where / the names are exactly circulation equivalent to the trust / given to them" (Prynne 2005: 19). David Caddy points out that "Prynne probes the relationship between word (name) and object within the economic field and suggests the ways it impacts on the self. He writes of how words and poems and quality, as habit, have been reduced to monetary objects by which we define ourselves. He notes that we are duped into a reductive cash flow nexus" (Caddy 2009: 27). The monetisation of language results in words being turned into carriers of meaning-value so that what is lost is their complex, dialectical relation to material reality – their capacity to stir poetic thought.

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[5] C. D. Blanton observes that Prynne's "attempt to remember a writing older than monetary circulation of the commodity, a writing which itself recalls older regimes of signification, offers an Archimedean critical point outside of economy" (Blanton 2000: 130).

One poem in *Sub Songs* that tackles the debilitating influence of profit-obsession is "Creosote Damping". It suggests that, as the logic of monetary gain comes to dominate our lives, what is lost is our ability to forge meaningful relationships with each other and discern perversions of ethics. In its second stanza, the poem evokes a link between "fortune" and a "dark penchant for friendship": "their fortune lapped / in a dark penchant for friendship" (Prynne 2010: 7). The ascription of "dark" to friendship seems to stem from its association with mercenary designs that are implied later in the poem: "Free up next visit revisit / revetment" (Prynne 2010: 7). While the pair "visit revisit" is implied to be a means to strengthening the friendship by setting up a sort of "revetment" or a fortification against the threats from without, the later lines indicate that the prospective friendship is merely a "considerate passive link, / to near adore" (Prynne 2010: 7). At best, relationships are thus reduced to passivity and no more than near adoration, as the poem insists that material gains are privileged over personal attachment. There are regular references to capital flow that forces people to live "On allowance fast linked / to handlist coupon redemption" (Prynne 2010: 7). Identity becomes just another "new phantom / profile", as people, "many by number", are kept complaisant by occasional gifts of "fragrance" (Prynne 2010: 7), an allusion to luxury products that in the context of a poem preoccupied with jingling advertisements indicates a way of promoting an image of affluence that average people may aspire to but never really attain.

The evocations of collapsed personal bonds, which are turned into mercenary relationships, and impoverishment mark the arrival of a crisis: "This fever in crisis by the window, shadows excused now / by objects presumed inwardly outside" (Prynne: 2010: 7). Windows recur throughout *Sub Songs* and in Prynne's earlier work, often suggesting an insight into the secret machinations of those in power. One of the best-known examples of this meaning comes in Prynne's 1983 volume *The Oval Window*, where the window represents the way "the real data" is filtered so that "operations / against the view are converted, through / a kind of unofficial window on Treasury policy, / into operations on the real data" (Prynne 2005: 319). The "unofficial window" represents a vantage on the "Treasury policy" that tampers with how real data is perceived until the alteration of "the view" begins to shape "the real data". In the above-cited fragment from "Creosote Damping", the connection implicit in the "crisis by the window" may be a matter of perception-tampering but also a tangible calamity, an object that, contrary to our presumptions, may actually be at hand. The subsequent stanzas provide some more details about the nature of this crisis, even though there is nothing certain about it: "all guesswork capital voids none in / first natural trim" (Prynne 2010: 7). The "capital voids" may be a reference to the fact that monetary value, having lost its "first natural trim", is no longer dependent on the parity of gold, a topic that Prynne has addressed not only in "Sketch

for a Financial Theory of the Self" but also in *A Note on Metal* (1968). But "void" also applies to the ethical grounding of human relationships and our ability to tell right from wrong. These various aspects of the crisis, all kept in potential relevance, are underlain by the depredation of language, "the word given in and up / desolate and radiant" (Prynne 2010: 7). Although the addition of "desolate and radiant" implies that "the word" retains its special evocative power, this power is (unwittingly in part, given the use of the passive voice) given up.

If some of the above-discussed ideas are crucial to "Creosote Damping", the poem only ever gestures at them through its constellations of associated vocabulary. What we are dealing with here is a space of potentiality in which certain meanings emerge and correlate but never freeze into finite theses and it is in the maintenance of such potentiality that "Creosote Damping" but also *Sub Songs* in general offer an antidote to the monologic perception of language. Whereas the discourse of economy seeks to employ language in as straightforward a fashion as possible in order to bolster the seeming reliability of its claims, a reliability that easily defaults to reification of thought through the simplification of idiom, poetry unleashes the process of dialectic construction-destruction whereby meanings must perpetually be worked out. With the rules of grammar observed only occasionally, *Sub Songs* induces us to activate other means of meaning-making: association through synonymy and sonic proximity, allusion to other poems and other uses of the term within a poet's own corpus, all of which constitute the operations of poetic thought.

5. Ailing bodies

Sub Songs repeatedly evokes various aspects of bodily damage, associating them with the duplicity of the pharmaceutical business that cares more for financial gain than a person's wellbeing. This aspect of the world evoked across the collection comes to particular prominence in "Riding Fine Off". The mid-section of the second stanza evokes a "lateral pin" (Prynne 2010: 11), which refers to the procedure of inserting a side pin to help stabilise fractured bones in arms or legs. The poem goes on to stress the benefits of the procedure (rhyming "win" with "pin" and adding that the agreement is "blind- / sight" (Prynne 2010: 11), which *OED* explains is "the ability of individuals with blindness to detect and respond to visual stimuli") even if it may not be covered by insurance. In addition, the poem mentions "folic" (Prynne 2010: 11), which is a vitamin, mainly found in green vegetables, used in the treatment of nutritional anaemias and "implant slope" (Prynne 2010: 11), which refers to an insertion of an implant into the palatal slope for sagittal and vertical movements or anchorage purposes. What all three share is the way they help one maintain stability of posture and vision so that, as the title may be taken to imply, one may ride off from the hospital fine.

However, "Riding Fine Off" goes on to suggest that the ailing bodies are each exposed to duplicitous shadowy practices, as the poem follows the images of medical procedures and decrepit bodily conditions with an invocation of "silicon versets" that are associated with trappings of financial success like "dapper onyx / fancy ride plentiful" (Prynne 2010: 12). One implication of these lines is that it is no longer clear whether "ride" in the title refers to people leaving hospitals or to the ones carrying out the operation and their "fancy ride". Moreover, there is little indication in the poem that any of these procedures actually alleviate the sufferer's condition but rather that they have become tantamount to a religious practice that admits of no critical revision and serves to enhance the medicine men's hankering after financial gratification.

A similar abrogation of ethics in terms of medicine is summoned in "As Mouth Blindness", whose initial suggestion of the presence of a malignant tumour is elaborated in the images of "nil transfusion", which seems to refer to a nil by mouth stricture following blood transfusion, "Replac[ing] broken tooth" and "gruesome genome" (Prynne 2010: 6). These implications of damaged bodies are then set against an image of a maternity ward:

> … lie in your broken bed if
> form is contented with that, sky returns
> in the birthing ward for ardent sweet
> relief of singularity …
>
> (Prynne 2010: 6)

Although the "birthing ward" is associated with brightness and hope, the "sweet / relief of singularity" sounds ironic in the context of the poem that discloses every manifestation of individuality as tending towards reification. This is further reinforced in the subsequent lines: "seed is to breed / placid transfer like to sake for it" (Prynne 2010: 6). The jingling effect suggests a clichéd language that is accepted by virtue of its catchiness so that the ostensible joy at a birth is implied to be little more than a "placid transfer" that might connect with the later evocation of "gruesome genome" as a replication of passivity. And yet, the further mention of "birth of denial in habit by / contraflow" (Prynne 2010: 6) retains hopes that the birth might come to break the habit of the "placid transfer". The idea is amplified by the exhortation to rise up against mendacious agendas of the day: "Time in the news to be not silent indoors, mouth in thought / shut up chew it" (Prynne 2010: 6). This plea for not being silent requires the "mouth in thought" to overcome its blindness but also to resist the pain, its "broken tooth" (Prynne 2010: 6), and become a "claimant for right" (Prynne 2010: 6).

The penultimate stanza of "As Mouth Blindness" conjures an image of "wounding in what is due" that brings together the damaged bodies and the

"birthing ward", suggesting that they might give rise to a resistance, as the subsequent lines imply: "For both / market done and stunned in face of, great lack breeds lank / less and less" (Prynne 2010: 6). The poem seems committed to the hope that the market might eventually be "done and stunned", as the "great lack" comes to stir the underprivileged, now being "lank / less and less", to action. And yet, the ending of the poem concludes on a bleak note that the slowly rising opposition to the market order is quenched: "we say / sustainable our mouth assents slave dental unbroken torrid reason / will commute previous and lie down" (Prynne 2010: 6). The "torrid reason" becomes a slave and commutes, in the sense of reverting back, to reification. The loss of agency is further implied in the phrase "our mouth assents" in that the synecdoche that reduces people to mere mouths implies that the assent has become an automatic and unreflective bodily reaction.

In setting up a connection between bodily hurt and mental compliance, "As Mouth Blindness" recalls the treatment of physical injury in *Wound Response* (1974) and a poem like "Treatment in the Field", which opens with an image of brightness similar to the opening of "As Mouth Blindness": "Through the window the sky clears" but this is then juxtaposed with an evocation of battle, so that "the / tones and sweetness confuse in saline", as the poem mixes "the cantilena of speech" (Prynne 2005: 216), itself suggestive of lyric perfection like that of Shelley's skylark, with an indication that it is a cry of pain at being wounded. Discussing "Of Movement towards a Natural Place" in the context of the bodily damage in as invoked throughout *Wound Response*, Douglas Oliver observes that the volume "starts with bodily and mental wounding" and argues that "if we may call a bruise a bodily pathology, then a pathology of mental experience is also possible – remorse and regrets which impair both language … and future action" (Prynne 1979: 96). On the one hand, "As Mouth Blindness" also implies that a pathology of the body is reflected in a pathology of language, on the other, though, in the later poem, the wounding does not reflect a single instant of perversion of language but rather suggests that language has become a damaged instrument that operates in senseless, repetitious jingles – such as *Sub Songs* repeatedly associates with capitalist profiteering in poems like "Creosote Damping". Neither language nor body can be fully scanned ("Not full / scanned at damage so far" (Prynne 2010: 6) would suggest as much) and "the data" are immediately associated with the above-discussed "parted tongue".

In "Skim for Either One", the image of the eye "so lost to lift in punic skyline" (Prynne 2010: 19) is shown to be equally vulnerable to being deceived ("punic" meaning "treacherous") by the prevarications of capitalism in the sense that the "Lunar panegyric" and the "puff creamy illusion" become "truth perfused / of the eye granular bolt, seeming / all in" (Prynne 2010: 20). As the "Lunar panegyric" unfolds in association with mendacious fables of capitalism, physical suffering is all that can be heard: "this fine song all / by volume told as drenched

up / in cries" (Prynne 2010: 20). The "fine song", possibly the fully-fledged, bird-like poetic flourishes like those of a nightingale merrily oblivious to the depredations of the human world, is here revealed to be ethically unsustainable. If poets are to help us see that "ruin and part ruin lie about us on all sides" (Prynne 2008: 631), as Prynne claims in "Huts", then they cannot afford the solipsistic quest for the perfect song but must go to the level of sub-song to face up to the panorama of suffering that is our late modernity.

6. Conclusion

In its formal complexity and denial of completion, *Sub Songs* stages resistance to an over-simplistic modes of thinking, which the poems identify as the source of ethical and economic perversions. The various evocations of mendacity, duplicity and suffering, physical as well as mental, are offset by summons to oppose this condition of intellectual reification. This opposition is often associated with the rejection of thinking predicated on repetitious slogans that insist on the irreducibility of the capitalist mode of economic organisation and its attendant ethical assumptions that seem to endorse hierarchical divisions of power. It is against such a vision of the late modern world that *Sub Songs* pitches its poetic of potentiality. By employing the compositional method that rejects syntax almost entirely in favour of juxtapositions of lexical items culled from various discourses that exist in tension generative of meanings, which are identifiable but also unstable, the poems create spaces of directed potentiality, both committed to a certain line of critique and impervious to espousing agendas. As it comes to offer a means of thinking that cannot be manacled to a single viewpoint or ideology, Prynne's collection welcomes the qualities of the ornithological sub-song, irregularity and indefinability, as bulwarks against calcified thought.

Given Prynne's avowal, in "Huts" and the 2016 interview, that poets are no traffickers in idealisms but must take full stock of the world about them in order to respond to its pressures, the commitment to revealing the perversions of the modern world in *Sub Songs* reveals how radically experimental work can take on the crises that play out in reality. The privileging of the potentiality of meaning critically responds to the overhasty declarations of opinion, which too readily apportion blame, thus becoming the equivalent to what Prynne called shooting your mouth off, which may be well-intentioned but ultimately defaults to the insidious thoughtlessness that continues to plague our world.

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