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A COMMENTARY ON J.H. PRYNNE'S "THOUGHTS
ON THE ESTERHÁZY COURT UNIFORM"

Robin Purves

"Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform" (*Poems* 99-100) as it appeared in Peter Manson's copy of Tim Longville and Andrew Crozier's anthology, *A Various Art*, was the first poem by J.H. Prynne that I frequently reread. The exact nature of the connection I felt to the poem is difficult to recall since I came across it in 1995 but I believe that I began to appreciate in going back to it repeatedly an obscurely registered but intimate apprehension of a perfected accord between its verbal music and the quality of its thought, without at the time being able to express the distinction of either. Prynne's poem seems both to have seduced me and communicated something, since I recall rereading it in order to deliver myself from certain kinds of mood or to enter the particular frame of mind the poem was adept at provoking. Comprehension of the text is a more arduous process to undergo than administering it to yourself as a kind of homoeopathic remedy and attaining the state where you are able to explain what you think you understand of the poem is more difficult yet; this commentary is the index of just how far these operations have got, and how far they still have to go.

In the first sentence, the poem's implied speaker continues to perform an ongoing activity; he walks on up the hill, to continue the previous poem or poems in *The White Stones* via the allusion to an ascent of Helicon, a mountain sacred to the Muses, and to a literal, upward-sloping progress across a surface of the earth. We are not much more than teased by the latter possibility in mentions of "the warm / sun" and "the now fresh & / sprouting world" since "we do not return, the place is / entirely musical." Here, the poem declares itself as a new venture, we head out in its company for the first time, to tackle subjects addressed in earlier poems in pioneering ways, and in fact by its end the poem will have held as far as is possible to the expression of a commitment to refuse the act of coming back to a

familiar place or condition. *This* place, at the end of the first sentence, is, as we have read, “entirely musical” – it may be a landscape whose furniture strikes the speaker as exhibiting the kind of harmony encountered most often in art, or the place exists only as or in poetry/music, as an abstracted entity which nevertheless allows us to encounter something important through its particular sequences of words/chords and rhythms. The fluctuation between the empirically verifiable experience and the theoretical meditation continues into the next sentence. We learn that “No person can live there” which might be a tribute to severe environmental conditions, related to the qualities of landscape which Prynne investigates as part of his study of Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper.” Or it might as well be an assertion of the abstract or virtual nature of the place to be thus minimally depicted and imaginatively traversed, since nowhere else are we given a description of the appearance of land as we might perceive it, nothing like a view of a section of the earth’s surface and sky as they might lie in our field of vision, seen in perspective from a particular point.

In *The White Stones*, a place is where a person can live. “Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform” comes roughly two-thirds of the way through this book, a distance after “The Glacial Question, Unsolved” which depicts the repeated obliteration and reconstitution of Britain’s land surface in glacial and interglacial periods at the earliest epoch of the Quaternary, thought to be between 1.6m and 10,000 years ago (though Prynne himself disputes the latter limit). The period is marked by fluctuations in temperature and therefore in sea-level, and marked also by the emergent presence of the earliest forms of *Homo sapiens*. The poem explains that the cultural adjustments made as a result of glacial inroads and withdrawals were formative of who ‘we’ are. The retreat of the ice permits for the first time forms of extended and permanent social organisation impossible in tundra conditions. This account prepares the way for the arguments of the essay in poetic prose, “A Note on Metal”, which is placed immediately after *The White Stones* in Prynne’s collected *Poems*. With the possibility of the agricultural development of newly available land we pass in a parallel shift from the Neolithic era, whose key substance is stone, to the Bronze Age, and the development of metallurgy. Alloys bring about new ways of relating to the attributes of the materials a society has at its disposal. Metal ploughshares being so much more efficient than wooden ones, land is more productive and the institution of settled farming communities

out of nomadic hunting tribes is said by Prynne to “produce the idea of *place* as the chief local fact” (Prynne 129). “Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform” does not deal with this kind of “idea of place”, however, so much as it does the idealised version referred to in the poem as “the home world.” Lines 4-12 seem, at first cryptically, to set out the coordinated resemblance between the impassioned experience of listening to music and the deeply felt requirement to gain ground, to make distance between where we are and where we desperately want to be. “What is similar” to – similar to but *not* – this “entirely musical” place is a more deep-seated means of meeting what it is we lack: though the direct reference as such is not yet in view, it’s alleged that its obscurity is itself some kind of direct reference to “my / own need”, the enigmatic trait confirmed by the dispossessing linebreak. What I might feel I need is the beautiful coincidence of orchestrated sound with strong feeling when cadence and rhythm make present, guide, defer and collect sentiments and meanings, and the urgent necessity to draw upon this “resource” to advance along the lines and sentences and greater units of poetic language.

The linebreak “musical / sense” indicates a separation of melodic attributes and semantics which could be taken as symptomatic; the suturing of melody with meaning sounds as if it might be the “hidden purpose” of the discourse. Is it simply the case that, as the poem appears to suggest, to proceed and prosper the poet must borrow from music, that poetry must take on its charm, the refinement of its movements, its strategic pauses, irresolutions and resolutions? There are some subtle indications that even as this notion is proposed it is already on the verge of being dismissed, because the irresistible euphonious “resource” with its “rhyme unbearable” ties us closer to the perimeter of the hearth it has become imperative to strike out beyond. At the climax of our commitment to composing an entirely musical advance into the world, “once again we are there, beholding the / complete elation of our end.” In other words we arrive back where we were, face-to-face with ourselves, looking at, observing, but hardly experiencing an utter joy and satisfaction at reaching “our end” – the limit which can encompass a former position or state, the culmination of a promise or goal, and the threshold of death. The point can be elucidated if we look at an essay by Simon Jarvis which analyses Hegel’s dialectical interpretation of versification. In his “Musical Thinking: Hegel and the Phenomenology of Prosody,” Jarvis explains that Hegel sees an analogue of the soul’s need to transcend itself in the propulsive force

of prosody, and of its need to know itself in what we call rhyme: “Rhyme, through the return of similar sounds, does not merely lead us back to those sounds. It leads us back to ourselves” (Jarvis 64). One of the essay’s conclusions is that the subject would be nothing at all, would have no existence without the experience of this harmonious re-cognition; Prynne’s poem might go as far as proposing this as a price worth paying.

Two linguistic features in particular are conspicuous on initial readings of “Thoughts on the Esterházy Court Uniform” even if the problem of their presumed relation has to wait upon a more developed sense of the poem’s concerns for its unravelling. The first is a subtle but insistent use of ‘is’, the third person singular form of the present tense of the verb ‘to be’, plus some instances of cognate forms: “we are there”, “where I am”, “I myself would be”, “it will not be the same”, “I shall be even / deeper”. The persistence of “is” alongside the preponderance of other present tenses throughout the poem is not enough to suggest that it underwrites *being* as a theme or that the poem can be said to *enact* the augury of a decisive presence. However, each deployment of “is” does seem, once its position in the line and in the sentence has been taken into consideration, to connect to either the potential requisition or disruption of a state of serenity and self-possession, a requisition which one day might support, and a disruption which now undermines, the elementary confidence in one’s ability and reliability in performing acts of substantiation, communication and perception. The defining presence of the copula, then, instead of delivering a payload of expressive purpose in the return to a fundamental precision that could make the poem abide as unequivocal statement, is complicated, tranquilized or neutralized by a weakening of the form and of the content of the proposition, since each time the ‘is’ and its other forms are invoked, they demarcate or define the “loss” lamented by the poem, or they describe the means by which we evade the consequences of that loss.

The second linguistic feature is the occasional employment of punctuation in the production of the apparent *non sequitur*:

The sun makes it easier & worse, like the
music late in the evening, but should it start
to rain – the world converges on the idea
of return. To our unspeakable loss; we make
sacred what we cannot see without coming
back to where we were. [33-38]

A more conventional punctuation would have replaced the full stop after ‘return’ with a comma, and the semi-colon after ‘loss’ with a full stop, but since relations of similarity and/or identity are upheld by the relative positions of words in a sentence, an actuality regularly subverted by poets in order to renew and vary patterns of imagery and structures of argument, the punctuation works alongside the operations on “is” to install the primacy of sequence, as one thing coming after another, instead of the regressive schedules of repetition and causation. At this point it might be worth mentioning a very brief essay by Raymond Geuss, “Melody as Death,” which recounts an experience from Geuss’s childhood when he first heard the music of Wagner on an LP owned by a friend. As the “Ride of the Valkyries” begins, the eleven or twelve year old Geuss is astounded by the quality of the sound, by Wagner’s “indescribable flourishes.” The second impression he recalls is his “complete and utter dejection...[as] an easily discernible motif emerged very clearly as an individual theme from the general whirl of sound. I remember thinking ‘Oh, no. There is a tune in this after all’” (Geuss 164, 165). Geuss nevertheless values the initial experience of his original hearing, declaring that to “hear for the first time music that was structured but not standardly individuated was exalting; it was a liberation, for which I have never ceased to be grateful” (165). The shock of listening to a progression still in the process of being created, outside a repetitive and resolvable structure, impresses the young Geuss more profoundly than the familiar pleasures of uncoiling melody and perhaps there is something here that matches the effect of Prynne’s sentences on me in 1995. The glory of such an occurrence is that it frees us towards a contact with the radically and enticingly unfamiliar; the danger is that we might fetishize the original experience, caught up in a nostalgia for our experience of the new.

Returning, as we must, to Prynne’s poem, if our orthodox participation in the structure of the sentence can be described as both teleological and retrospective, since we piece together a sense of what is coming but can’t tell what’s there until we look back from the vantage of the period, the modifications at points in this poem change standard ways of ending a sentence to new beginnings, and shift conventional beginnings to the centre. The interruption of the sentence below by a full stop between “sound” and “I” has the same kind of effect:

Our music the past tense:
 if it would only
level out into some complete migration of
sound. I could then leave unnoticed, bring nothing
with me, allow the world free of its displacement. [52-57]

Sometimes a sentence, instead of being cut short by a premature full stop, appears to be extended beyond its natural duration by a clause whose relation to the rest of the sentence is not at all obvious:

 With such
patience maybe we can listen to the rain
without always thinking about rain, we
trifle with rhyme and again is the
sound of immortality. [73-77]

The application of unexpected punctuation marks alters the grammatical format of selected sentences in various ways, but the poem from beginning to end, across the branching in and between sentences by subordinate clauses in normative sequences or even by an ostensible *non sequitur*, is inhabited by a subject who continuously indicates his position relative to certain circumstances by these movements of demarcation, deviation and conversion. Since the web of language and its syntactical orders permit and reinforce the structures of our existence and our social intercourse, the usages of 'is' and the *non sequitur* can reflect in their re-orderings our own estrangement from a shared sense of place in the world, by submitting to the inevitability of descent/return as in the above example, and also function as an incorporated revision of our relationship with language and with each other.

The opening section of the poem is split by a new paragraph which for the first time makes explicit the identical function of (rather than similarity between) 'music' and 'home.' A core argument can be paraphrased as follows: that every separate act of regress or adjustment towards the notion of the world-as-home *is* our current condition of bereavement, diminution, and our degraded life is only maintained and exacerbated by its status as ridiculous simulation while we repeatedly hark back (experiencing a negligible excitement as we do). Meanwhile "our motives", the priorities and ambitions which might induce us to initiate significant movement, burn up and

are consumed “in / the warm hearth”, the homely place of familiar relations. “What I have”, which here is probably not meant to be distinct from what or who I *am*, is, before the question was asked, the forfeiture of my proper relation to self and world, and the loss exerts an inexorable pull to draw me back to the point where I began. Put another way, “my life slips into music” in a way that is hardly chosen, having lost its footing and fallen below a certain standard and, released from meaningful connection, it is principally taken up with the trifling combination of sounds as pleasant ditties: poetry in its most depleted condition. It is this habit under which it is time to draw a line. The last incidence of such a fall, the “end cadence”, is put off, however; it is suspended “like breathing”, revealing the extent to which it is identified with life itself and therefore the radical difficulty involved in calling a halt or generating enough velocity for escape. The section concludes with the summoning of the dramatic finale to the first performance of Haydn’s Symphony No. 45 in F sharp minor, obliquely referenced in the poem’s title, where the homesick musicians, sequestered in Esterhaza, stood up and took their leave one after another. The “birthplace of the poet” must be the moment where the heard music stops and we are in the land of silence and darkness.

The most emphatic break in the poem separates this section from that which begins: “How can we sustain such constant loss” [24]. In asking the question, but omitting the question mark, of how man endures and even encourages this chronic and incessant form of privation the question is answered: we want it, as we want to find excuses and invent motives to stay where we are and to linger more interminably with “the feeling that rejoins the whole” [28]. The ardour, quickened by both music and the idea of ‘home’, of our attachment to the state of dispossession is at its most seductive in the moments when we feel everything is brought together in a culminating instant. Each “sovereign point” is a tapering extremity or brief melodic strain that we would consent to inhabit, if it were possible, but which is nevertheless available to be re-experienced. The poem insists though that “we look back” - but that we never, ever *get* back and our reasons for acting “have more courage” in the way we have constructed them than in what we think they consist. We are absolutely correct to desire, even if we are absolutely mistaken about what we ought to be desiring. “The sun makes it easier & worse” [33] in our pursuit of this existence, by fostering clement weather perhaps, but principally no doubt by returning to us as the dawn of every day

so that “the world [itself] converges on the idea / of return” [35-36]. The punctuation here works to connect “our unspeakable loss” to the previous sentence and to the rest of its own sentence, equably and profitably: sun or rain, the world comes together at moments which ought only to confirm its unimaginable forfeiting. The section ends with a part-sentence, “we make / sacred what we cannot see without coming / back to where we were” [36-38]. Then another paragraph-style gap or pause occurs before “the sacred / word” is announced as “*Again.*” The fact that there is no real way back to what is not worth returning to helps explain why we revere and dedicate ourselves to that which we already know: “the profane sequence”, that is, the chain of unhallowed moments we call time, is accorded an inviolable status it does not deserve by the longing, retrospective gaze. The speaker at this point changes tack to cast a similar set of aspersions on the self-serving motives we have for investment in a future, the inauthenticity of our actions, tendencies, expectations and memories. When we think we act, we perform our memory of a previous performance of a previous act, never the act itself. If “Our music [is] the past tense” [52] we are beguiled by a principle of recapitulation which only provides another imperative motive to let the dead bury the dead. Since we *are* our own loss, since I am my own instance of it, one possible course might be the adoption of a nomadic condition: “I could then leave unnoticed, bring nothing / with me,” though the gulf between the reason for this means of departure and the tentative possibility of realising it is figured on the page as a daunting white space. If it were somehow to be achieved, however, the speaker imagines he might slip unencumbered from his present state and give his consent to the truth of the world, both he and the world having been liberated from their mutual dispossession and indignities. For a moment he gives in to a fantasy of total irrelevance: “Then I myself would be the / complete stranger, not watching jealously / over names.” Being and having nothing, he might live in a completely unfamiliar place, an alien person freed from the responsibility of vigilance over and solicitude for the terms poetry might deliver now from the language. The fantasy is, though, easily dispelled by the profound relevance and persistence of an extant home address and “our / idea of it” - both will have to be abandoned forever if they are not to distract us or weigh us down: “it’s this we must leave in some quite / specific place if we are not to carry it / everywhere with us.” [61-63] The speaker and reader identified as a species of mollusc, dragging our refuge, and the idea of it, on our backs.

The sense, as the text moves into its final stretches, is that life will begin to go on again as normal after the interlude of the poem, and that the speaker’s sense of his own alienation will be detained and drowned out by the music of his existence. “Music is truly the / sound of our time,” [68-69] and time can make a terrific noise as it passes through the straits of the human world. As it does so, we re-experience our homelessness and perhaps settle into it, at home there, denuded of all confidence and fidelity, in a chronic situation where all trust is lost: “the loss is trust and you could / reverse that without change.” [71-72]

The last paragraph of the poem begins “With such patience” and the preposition manages to cover a number of potential readings: if we cannot escape our condition, if we must then endure it with calmness and composure, “maybe we can listen to the rain / without always thinking about rain” [74-75]. On the night between the 26th and 27th of April 1818, Keats lay awake “listening to the Rain with a sense of being drown’d and rotted like a grain of wheat” and deduced “a continual courtesy between the Heavens and the Earth” (Keats 84). If Prynne’s rain is the rain which earlier was said to accelerate the convergence of the world “on the idea / of return” then perhaps, by means of an effort at constancy and forbearance, not “thinking about rain” while listening to it might avoid the tendency to circle back endlessly and despondently. Its sound would be sound alone, signifying nothing, with some kind of resonance for us maybe, though it might not have to be connected to the condition of our lives, as it is in the poem and in the letter which provides the quotation from Keats. On the other hand, if our suffering sustains and is sustained by the capacity to “listen to the rain / without always thinking about rain,” or the skill is symptomatic of our debility, the sentence welds this curious fact to another: that poetry or, more specifically, rhyme and repetition is the means to assure a lasting reputation: “we / trifle with rhyme and again is the / sound of immortality” [75-77]. At this elusive and ambiguous juncture, the poem, in a conceivably premature move, declares that we “think we have / it” though, again, the linebreak begs to differ and the next phrase simply announces the necessity that we do. That we do have what? “[T]he sacred resides in this; / once more falling into the hour of my birth, going / down the hill and then in at the back door” [78-80]. As what goes up always must come down, this furtive Odysseus is the inevitable agent of an inevitable, predicted end cadence which

has us tumble back once more to the point before the point where we began.

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