

explorations



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REVIEW

Wit Pietrzak. 2012. *Levity of Design. Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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Wit Pietrzak's *Levity of Design. Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne* is an interesting and pioneer critical study devoted to the poetic work of J. H. Prynne, the most significant representative of the so-called Cambridge School of Poetry, a loose group of poets debuting in the 1960s and including Tom Raworth, Andrew Crozier, John James, Peter Riley or Veronica Forrest-Thomson (to name just a few). As the Polish scholar admits, the book is the "result of a sudden yet profound fascination" (vii), and I think one can easily feel this while reading the essays that make up this intense and terse monograph – they are critically charged and present a rare combination of credentials: not only in-depth knowledge of contemporary poetic idioms but also a belief in the power of literature as well as remarkable responsiveness to the linguistic and formal nuances of Prynne's texts.

While introducing his book, Pietrzak notes: "Not only has [Prynne's] work exerted an enormous influence over my understanding and appreciation of poetry but also has brought about changes in my perception of the task of the literary critic. There are books that we simply have to write, in order to put in writing the genuine amazement with a particular *oeuvre*, to phrase the peculiar thrall in which it has kept us; this is one of those books. Reading and rereading Prynne's poems has become a way of conversing with myself and the world as my experience of his work turned from an unnerving interest into a thrilling discovery of the unexpected" (vii). These are considerable claims. However, they are substantiated in the course of the detailed and thorough analyses which constitute the bulk of this volume. What strikes us is the Polish critic's active and apparently unflagging involvement in the process of interpreting Prynne's texts; the word *process* should be stressed here as this is the poetry which requires our willingness to converse with it and at the same time our openness to its fundamental ambiguities and constantly changing meanings.

Prynne is a notoriously elusive poet, pushing the avant-garde sensibility to its furthest limits. He has been criticized for his arcaneness and obscure communications which make for what Neil Corcoran, a perceptive commentator on the contemporary

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poetic scene, called a “hermetic impasse” (qtd in Pietrzak, 1). Actually, critical objections range from complaints about the impenetrability of Prynne’s idiom and its irritating repetitiveness to imputations of writing “for a narrow clique of pundits” (again Corcoran as qtd in Pietrzak, 9). *Levity of Design* is an obvious attempt to counter and rebut such accusations; one of Pietrzak’s first statements is that Prynne’s is “perhaps the single most important voice in the poetic discussion on late-modern subjectivity” (1).

Importantly, the Polish author situates the Prynnean *oeuvre* in the double context of the Anglo-American High Modernism with its later variants (e. g. American avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s, concrete poetry, the Language group poets) and the dense speculative concepts worked out by Heidegger (especially in his later texts) and Adorno. Of many critical themes mentioned and analyzed in this monograph, the question of the subject is clearly underlined as a “prime example of the crisis within late modernity” (2). In a way, Pietrzak tells us a familiar story of the death and rebirth of the author, starting with the idea of “subjectivity under siege” (this phrase appears in the title of Chapter One) and ending with the strongly articulated assertion to the effect that the “subject is liberated” in a “liberated language” (156). According to the Polish critic, the “disentanglement of the self” is clearly discernible in Prynne’s late collections *Blue Slides at Rest* (2004), *Streak – Willing – Entourage Artesian* (2009) and *Subsongs* (2010). Here are the poems, goes the argument, which “restitute the subjects” and mark the “moment of ingression of the late modern subject” (156).

The book contains four chapters which are preceded with a short introduction entitled “J. H. Prynne, Avant-Garde and Neo-Modernism” (where the pride of place is given to Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* and Marjorie Perloff’s *21st Century Modernism. The “New” Poetics*). The first chapter provides us with several theoretical assumptions which inform the critic’s subsequent interpretations of Prynne’s works. One of the central theses is that what we call late modernity is intrinsically aporetic, in the sense that it questions and undoes its own (cultural, social, political, aesthetic) premises. As Pietrzak vehemently argues, it is a heightened stress on critical subjectivity that may help us cope in a positive way with the aporia of the self-annihilating irony inherent in the postmodern condition. It comes as no surprise, then, that we come across a number of telling references to Harold Bloom’s critical vision of the agonistic self and Agata Bielik-Robson’s philosophical divagations on the possibility of subjectivity in the form of the agent remodeling itself and (rather paradoxically) becoming its own influence. The idea of the embattled, internally conflicted self becomes for the Polish scholar a crucial point of critical reference, culminating in the discussions of Heidegger’s concept of the work of art and Adorno’s notion of negative dialectics, two theoretical axes of the book.

In Chapters Two to Four Pietrzak gives us interpretations of Prynne’s poems, starting with *Kitchen Poems* (1968), through the important volume *The Oval Window* (1983), to the meandering, opaque later works (the last chapter is focused on *Blue Slides at Rest*). The readings are remarkably meticulous and engaged, with the critic stressing the passages where the poet plays, or seems to play, with the notions of self, agency and identity. It has to be noted, though, that translating Prynne’s poetry into argumentative segments is a serious challenge, very often doomed to failure as one is confronted with subversive, deconstructive stances, which, frankly speaking, defy any critical interpretation. Like many critics writing about Prynne, Pietrzak faces a delicate problem of how not to get caught into the trap of intentional fallacy with its routine of reading one’s intentions and expectations into poems. Importantly, the English poet is not only

aware of this danger but makes it the central paradox of his work, somewhat in line with Archibald MacLeish's celebrated dictum "a poem should not mean/ But be." How to write about the poems that resist our intelligence? The author of *Levity of Design* seems aware of the import of such questions, and he is ready to answer them: "Prynne's radical innovations ... are here explored with a view to demonstrating that only through such experiments can the idiom be renewed. Prynne appears to realize that by bringing language to the brink of signification and iterability, beyond which no communication is possible ... he attains a tension within his poems that infuses words with a new life." (9).

REFERENCES

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