DECALIBRATING THE LANGUAGE.
J. H. PRYNNE'S *BITING THE AIR*

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J.H. Prynne's poetry is famed for being so "impenetrably opaque" as to come close to "neo-Modernist hermetic impasse" (Corcoran 1993: 177), and yet, his work continues to excite, speaking of modernity, of our here and now: the intricate space of the Western World. Given their involvement in the contemporary moment, why are his poems so resistant, indeed, so difficult? Perhaps, T. S. Eliot's explanation of why contemporary poets must be difficult pertains to Prynne for the same reason it did to Eliot, Pound, and other High Modernists.

> Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Eliot 1960: 248)

Eliot suggests that common language cannot unveil the nature of reality because it cannot amalgamate the variety of the world. Thus in order for the poem to depict reality, the poet needs to play the idiom against itself in order to flex more expressiveness from it.

It is the distinction between allusive poetic language and ordinary idiom that is explored in depth by Prynne throughout his work. On the one hand he shows an ordinary idiom to be an agent of people's enslavement in certain modes of discourse; and on the other, through the lyrical "dislocation of language into

meaning", he probes incisively into the modes of such linguistic enslavement, or "calibration", as the last section of *Biting the Air* (2003) calls it:

> […] Don't you yet notice
> a shimmer on bad zero, won't you walk there
> and be the shadow unendurably now calibrated. (Prynne 2005: 564)

Calibration is here connected with becoming a shadow, a spectral being that is neither dead nor alive, as it has turned into a property of space, a "bad zero" dimension, as algebraic geometry would have it. Calibrated, people become elements of material reality: measurable and definable, bereft of all free thinking and critical faculty.[1] In the present article, I seek to unpack the idea of man's calibration in Prynne's *Biting the Air*, setting the analysis in the broader context of international criticism of modernity as shown in Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and Zbigniew Herbert's "Report from the Besieged City" (1983).

In a seminal essay "Huts", Prynne observes that language is not an innocent means of communication. By tracing various connotations of the word "hut", he reveals it as simultaneously comprising both the innocuous aspect of language and its rather frightening undercurrents: "All this in huts, with dual aspect of benign and hostile shelter, human life simple and serene or under ominous threat" (Prynne 2008: 629). On the one hand, huts are shown to be people's haven, protecting them from the natural world, the last outpost of a civilization in which they can feel at home, with ominous howls coming from the outside; huts are also the thinker's refuge, like the one in Todnauberg, or possibly suburban tree-houses for kids. On the other hand, however, such structures dominate a less benign side of "the mental imagery of modern life":

> Raised up on wooden gantry supports, these are the watchtowers of divisive and punitive regimes which for instance separated the two Germanies and patrolled the perimeters of the final-solution camps during the Third Reich […]. These are also the huts of our recent era, of the Stalag and the Stalinist deportation and death-camps […]. The hut-configuration is everywhere, in temporary prisons and internment camps and militarised frontier posts. On Thursday 20 December 2007 the London *Times* published an already familiar photograph in stark black-on-white profile of an armed surveillance post, raised up against the wired perimeter fencing at the entry to Camp Delta of the detention facility at Guantánamo Bay; and this is unmistakably another prototype hut-structure, not unlike the raised watchtowers at the Birkenau death-camp. (Prynne 2008: 629–630)

So seemingly innocent a word as "hut" evokes irreconcilable strains of associations. Prynne suggests that this tension between hospitality and hostility informs all language; words and the images they create, despite their explicitly benign connotations, may be underlain with implications of tyranny and ill-will. In the

light of this fact Prynne asserts that poets, whose craft is words, cannot delude themselves into assuming that their work has little traffic with the material reality. If "ruin and part-ruin lie about us on all sides", then Prynne emphasizes that the "poets are how we know this, are how we may dwell not somewhere else but where we are" (Prynne 2008: 631–632). A clear division into material and linguistic reality —with the implication that the former lies hidden beneath an infinite number of intertwining layers of simulacra, signs "which dissimulate that there is nothing" (Baudrillard 1983: 12)— appears untenable. Any change in the world triggers landslides in languages, and conversely an alteration in linguistic praxis affects the material world. This premise is in itself nothing new.

Adorno observed that it is the power of art to "to let those things be heard which ideology conceals. Whether intended or not, success [of works of art] transcends false consciousness" (Adorno 2006: 214). Since according to Adorno, language tends to be reified into a cliché-infused common speech, it is the indomitable experimentalism of art that subverts the accepted idioms. The process of language appropriating reality and making it a product of the prevalent discourses is pertinently described by Foucault.

> Truth is a thing of this world —says Foucault— it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 2001: 1668)

The notion of truth not only engenders but also helps to maintain certain discourses, which with time become self-sustaining. As Foucault explains, "truth" is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (Foucault 2001: 1669). In order to assure its continuation, any system of power proffers a discourse that validates the regime, just as the regime in turn validates the discourse. As mutually supportive, the system of power and its discourse establish what they wish to see as the final truth. To this end, it is claimed that only by adhering to the "true" model can people's survival and happiness be ensured. It is against such a seemingly innocuous language that Prynne speaks in "Huts". Never is a hut an innocent shed or a tree-house —he argues— for at the same time it connotes a sentry tower. Whenever used, the word engages all these possible strains of associations that have come to "motivate" its meaning in the course of history (Prynne 1993: 14). Thus Prynne indicates that if one pays close attention to language, no sentence will be univocal, and no word innocent, but they will always reflect on and challenge the prevalent linguistic face of a particular reality.

For Prynne, smoothly organized and transparent language is an agent of implicit reification, a servant of a regime of incontrovertible truth; a lucid argument will show a hut as a simple building many of us have in our gardens. It is therefore the act of testing this language, breaking its seemingly unshakeable structures, that shocks us into awareness that our mode of using words is permeated with ready-made clichés that prevent the realisation that language may be a vehicle of enslavement: a calibration of one's thinking. As Prynne explains in his essay "Poetic Thought",

> The extreme density of the unresolved, which maintains the high energy levels of language in poetic movement, its surreptitious buzz, may resemble unclarity which it partly is; but strong poetic thought frequently originates here, in the tension about and across line-endings, even in functional self-damage or sacrifice as the predicament of an emerging poem determined not to weaken or give way. Thought in this matrix is not unitary (unlike ideas), but is self-disputing and intrinsically dialectical. (Prynne 2010: 599)

The poet's task, among other things, is then to rupture "meaning habits" to counter the "facile acceptance of the commonplace" (Prynne 2010: 598) that, as Foucault claims, is always a product of a "regime of truth". In the case of *Biting the Air*, the "commonplace" discourse is that of reckless capitalism that has run free of any control, validating itself as a universal law. It is Don DeLillo who, in *Cosmopolis*, captures the moment when this capitalist vernacular has won ostensibly unquestionable hegemony.

At the beginning of the novel, as the capitalist prodigy, Eric Packer, cruises across New York in his custom-made limousine to get a haircut, he sees various employees about his recent stock market bid. Among them there is his currency analyst Michael Chin. At one point, the two men engage in an exchange of opinions that obliquely addresses the notion of language determining capitalist reality:

> "There's a poem I read in which a rat becomes the unit of currency".
> "Yes. That would be interesting", Chin said.
> "Yes. That would impact the world economy".
> "The name alone. Better than the dong or the kwacha".
> "The name says everything".
> "Yes. The rat", Chin said.
> "Yes. The rat closed lower today against the euro".
> "Yes. There is growing concern that the Russian rat will be devalued".
> "White rats. Think about that".
> "Yes. Pregnant rats".
> "Yes. Major sell-off of pregnant Russian rats".
> "Britain converts to the rat", Chin said.
> "Yes. Joins trend to universal currency".
> "Yes. U.S. establishes rat standard".

> "Yes. Every U.S. dollar redeemable for rat".
> "Yes. Stockpiling dead rats called global health menace". (DeLillo 2003: 23–24)

Both Packer and Chin are genuinely entertained by the idea of making rat the unit of currency, and it is one of the few moments in the novel when Packer does seem to be enjoying himself. What transpires from this isolated dialogue —dropped as sharply as it was begun, as is usual in DeLillo— is the indication that money in fact poses a lethal threat to humanity. Were all the world's currencies to be converted to rats, it would mean a global health crisis, a plague. Though partly unwittingly, Chin hints at the peril intrinsic to money, noting that "the name says everything". If that name were turned to rat, it would become clear that the stockpiling of capital proves lethal. Switching from one arbitrary name, say the dollar, to another, in this case the rat, shows that a change in lexical item used may uncover an unacknowledged aspect of the nature of material reality. When Packer earns millions of dollars, it is a reason to rejoice at the accrual of purchasing power, but were he to accumulate millions of rats, his life would clearly be in jeopardy.

In this episode, it is implied that the grim reality of the present times results from the fact that nobody realizes that not only Packer's New York but also the entire Western World are "under the siege of the Wall Street wildcat deregulated capitalism of the late 1990s and early 21st century. Eric Packer's viewpoint is just as much that of a victim as that of a perpetrator" (Giaimo 2011: 109). He is a victim of the "wildcat", or "ratted capitalism" insomuch as he does not see that money has infested the world, it can neither be controlled nor its flow or impact on individuals predicted. Without anyone realising it, capital-obsessed language has become the Foucaultian "discourse of truth", supported by and supporting tycoons like Packer. Although he persistently claims his massive buy-out of the yen is a good investment despite all the evidence to the contrary: "Nothing applies. But it's there. It charts. You'll see it" (DeLillo 2003: 37), Packer eventually goes bankrupt because evidently everything does not any longer chart. As in Albert Camus, the rats carry plague that not only destroys lives but also the individual's humaneness. Also, as in *La Peste*, the plague of money has percolated into human nature and will now elude every attempt at comprehending its structure. As a result, everything solid that the rat touches turns into miasmatic air. *Cosmopolis* demonstrates the dark side of modernity in which the capital, the spectre haunting the world, has transformed all the former givens into "the great rapacious flow" (DeLillo 2003: 41). It is this world that Packer has contributed to creating in no small measure. He is thus among the perpetrators of the crime of letting the plague loose in the city and all over the world. Packer fails to realise this because, as Prynne has implied in "Poetic Thought", "a discourse practice defaults in a wink to […] bending compliantly under commercial or political distortions, to

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accommodate by self-corruption" (Prynne 2010: 598). In the reality of Cosmopolis, the rat can raise a laugh but not awareness of its threat.

The idea of rat becoming the unit of currency Packer takes from Herbert's "Report from the Besieged City". The poem, one of Herbert's best-known, is spoken by a chronicler of an unknown city's struggle against various invaders, endlessly besieging the city. The context of Poland's fight for independence and autonomy[2] is manifestly alluded to in the poem, but in broader terms the lyric may be located in the tradition of anti-war poetry. In an ironic gesture, Herbert forestalls any attempt at glorification of war and shows the atrocious consequences of the siege. However, he never gives up on the belief in the society's surviving the conflagration.

Apart from the fact that a line of the poem is quoted in the novel, another aspect of "Report from the Besieged City" that strikingly invokes the digit-obsessed tycoon of *Cosmopolis* is that the speaker, in the manner of a diligent analyst, will "avoid any commentary" and "keep a tight hold on my emotions I write about facts" (Herbert 2000: 149). In a typically Herbertian way, "expressing quotidian truths by indirection or allusion and, thereby creating the savvy voice of a sort of poetic antihero for the times" (Arana 2008: 210), the speaker focuses on facts as the only certainty in a world where nothing is certain. Yet, there is pronouncedly little on which to base his account, and so he makes do with whatever sureties he has:

> I write as I can in the rhythm of interminable weeks
> monday: empty storehouses a rat became the unit of currency
> tuesday: the mayor murdered by unknown assailants
> wednesday: negotiations for a cease-fire the enemy has imprisoned our messengers
> […]. (Herbert 2000: 149)

The long lines, punctuated with regular stresses that add to the monotony of the heinous bloodshed, conjure up the inevitability and endlessness of the atrocities. The speaker realizes in his detached, matter-of-fact tone that "all of this is monotonous I know it can't move anyone" (Herbert 2000: 149). No emotional appeal can bring empathy from the possible allies of the city, for what excites the international attention are facts, "only they it seems are appreciated in foreign markets". Already in 1982 Herbert seems to have anticipated the market's obsession with facts that is later to mar Eric Packer's life. What is hinted at in the poem is that the more minute the coverage of facts the more likely it is that the planned ventures will yield maximum profit. Herbert's speaker does present some facts for us, mockingly alluding to Communist addresses to the nation's labourers:

> yet with certain pride I would like to inform the world
> that thanks to the war we have raised a new species of children
> our children don't like fairy tales they play at killing
> awake and asleep they dream of soup of bread and bones
> just like dogs and cats […]. (Herbert 2000: 149)

In the horrifying reality of Herbert's poem, the war has finally caused a complete dehumanization. The children, born during the siege, know only the world that is steeped in betrayal and murder. Nevertheless, in a flight of perverse logic, it is given as a reason to rejoice, since the loss of humanity and innocence precipitates the mastery of survival skills. Like the "dogs and cats", the children, emaciated and ill though they are, linger on, able to inure themselves to whatever circumstances. This is the world "In peril by abatement/ subsisting", which is also dominated by the injunction, "want a scrap don't take it" (Prynne 2005: 561). Here, the rat has become the unit of currency.

However, Herbert does envision a path beyond this horror. In spite of the fact that the war has lasted as long as anyone can remember, the speaker looks forward to a time after the siege has ended in the most likely defeat of the defenders: "and if the City falls but a single man escapes/ he will carry the City within himself on the roads of exile/ he will be the City" (Herbert 2000: 151). Herbert uses a familiar high modernist image of the present state of chaos that is bound to lead to a total annihilation in the future. Yet, for the time being "we still rule over the ruins of temples spectres of gardens and houses/ if we lose the ruins nothing will be left". Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" sounds an underlying note in Herbert's lyric. "Report from the Besieged City" implies that in view of the deepening chaos and raging war, men must turn their backs on the future, into which the current of history carries them inexorably[3], and their faces to the past when temples and gardens stood in their glory. This is as much an aesthetic dictum as a moral imperative because Herbert notes that only (Roman-Catholic, Western) culture and tradition are the source of human values: "Ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, and ontology are intimately interconnected by casting out the moral imperative, by stepping out of his self-created form, humankind becomes obscure and unbearable to itself and eventually dissolves into nothingness" (Shallcross 2002: 107–108). In "Report from the Besieged City", the survivor can only hope to ensure that the defenders' deaths were not in vain if he retains the image of an untarnished legacy of the city in his heart.

Interestingly, Herbert hints that the future is to be the time of the feral children and "ratted currencies", and it is that kind of future that DeLillo depicts in *Cosmopolis*. Eric Packer, merrily toying with the possibility of converting to the rat, says that he was always "younger than anyone around" and Michael Chin is only twenty-two; both may thus be taken as representing Herbert's new species of children in that they thrive in the capitalist world thanks to their exceptional instinct that allows them to survive in the hostile reality. Moreover, Packer is by no means a simpleton, for he collects art and shows keen interest in natural science and foreign languages; he is also given to occasional meditations on beauty and transcendence. However,

he cannot be counted among Herbert's inheritors of the City's glory as none of the things that he dabbles in prove of durable value to him, except making money. It is only his odyssey across the city, a descent from his luxurious Manhattan penthouse into "the squalor of Hell's Kitchen", that leads him to the realization of the pernicious effects of his capital-obsession and "marks the authentic ascent of the soul" (Dewey 2006: 142). However, what this journey of self-discovery allows him to understand is that his long-cherished, essentially modernist idea that the world is "knowable and whole" is an illusion. Thus DeLillo suggests that Herbert's temples and gardens have been commoditized and are no longer a valid legacy of man's undaunted dignity and moral autonomy. At the same time, it becomes clear that Packer has underestimated the rat which eventually defeats his financial genius. This is because the "ratted capitalism" proves to be an uncontainable epidemic whose presence goes undetected even by the ingenious Eric Packer.

Packer is beguiled by money, of which he thinks he is the master, because he fails to understand that it has already become a "global health menace". Neither is Herbert's legacy of high modernist trust in the temples and gardens of the bygone age of any avail in late modernity. In the novel, it is the artist Mark Rothko's Chapel that represents the Herbertian idea of art as the conveyor of past glory. Packer wants to buy it all, and completely disregards Didi Fancher's assertion that it "belongs to the world", responding shortly that "It's mine if I buy it" (DeLillo 2003: 28). Thus art becomes a chattel and Packer will not accept that purchase does not mean the Chapel is his. In his vocabulary, buying is a synonym to absorbing, art being no exception. This, we are being led to believe, is a universal law. The carrier of this idea is discourse, the "ratted language" that is no longer under man's control. One must accept it and begin accumulating capital in all its forms: financial, cultural, and social, thereby inevitably becoming calibrated. Every attempt at escaping this hegemony comes at the cost of life, as Packer discovers in his confrontation with Beno Levin.

Thus we come to Prynne's *Biting the Air*. In this volume, Prynne offers a diagnosis of the crisis and repeatedly seeks to dislocate, and thus challenge, the "ratted discourse" of calibration that has come to dominate late modernity. Eliot's idea that poets must "dislocate the language into meaning" becomes the necessary step to poetic composition and expression. As Prynne argues, "the focus of poetic composition […] projects into the textual arena an intense energy of conception and differentiation, pressed up against the limits which are discovered and invented by composition itself" (2010: 596). By attempting to tax language to the limits of expressiveness, in *Biting the Air* Prynne continues his life-long project of forcing the reading process, in fact the process of human comprehension of a language, to acknowledge the elusive undercurrents of the meanings of words. Nigel Wheale, writing of Prynne's earlier book *Red D Gypsum* (1998), makes an important point:

> The ways in which we read these poems are the strategies that we have to develop to move through language; they are also the ways in which language acquires us, in the sense that the word hoard bestows so many options for meanings, a virtually infinite array of possible connectives within which we play, as if in a game. (2009: 182)

The idea that language acquires us leads back to the "ratted discourse" as the source of calibration —the process of turning people into unreflective and fact-focused consumers of goods as well as ready-made ideas. An attempt at challenging this language results in (at best sublime) auto-destruction, as in Packer's case, or commodification of what was considered aesthetic resistance. In the network of languages, material reality, as Prynne implies in "Huts", becomes what the dominant vocabulary turns it into. Perhaps Camp Delta is an outpost of the defenders against a tidal wave of violence, or maybe it is a political prison. One can obtain no tangible data that could contradict either claim, so the choice of which description to accept is predicated on a purely arbitrary basis: whose discourse of persuasion waxes more convincing?

In *Biting the Air*, Prynne demonstrates throughout that the ways we make sense of words are not finite and do not depend on a set of given rules. Indeed, the sentence structure that the speakers of English adhere to in order to understand one another's sentences is by no means innocent. Syntactic order and lexical systematization are acquired subliminally, leaving the speaker unaware that they exist at all. Shake the fundamentals of language as we use it and the result will show new ways of creating sense, which may demand more attention (or perhaps a different kind of attention) from the reader or listener but offer richer and more nuanced expressiveness.[4] After all, language "is a pluralised system, invested with contradictions which are themselves the diagram of its energetic over-determination" (Prynne 2000: 146). Prynne invites us to appreciate those contradictions inherent in language, knowing that in his poems far fewer meaningful associations stand to be lost than in the modes of transmission following the prescribed rules. In this way, poetry, as Thurston and Alderman have optimistically put it, "can hope to evade and resist the instrumentalization of language, precisely because it seeks to give abstract nomenclature the slip" (Thurston and Alderman 2013: 292). It may be noted that Prynne both challenges and supports Wittgenstein's assertion that "what can be said at all can be said clearly" (Wittgenstein 2009: 27). On the one hand, Prynne does not believe in saying it "clearly", that is, by following the established linguistic routines, since that would immediately bring about exposure to the ubiquitous force of calibration. On the other hand, the message that he sends in *Biting the Air* is arguably couched in precisely the most apt manner for it.

The book comprises a series of conflicts. To put the matter broadly, the strife is played out between the centre and the margins. Moreover, what proves vital to the volume is that the conflict, whatever form it takes, sets linguistic innovation, always teetering on the brink of non-meaning, against the routine discourse of the ubiquitous rat.

> […] all price diluted
> and fuming over nil-paid: it is easy to make
> a country prosperous and blue and bright over
> and blindness forever in hand on hand proverb. (Prynne 2005: 553)

The stanza might be spoken by a representative of some company, who describes the workers' rage at being "nil-paid". The workforce, or "rag hands" as they are referred to in the opening of the poem, cannot accept the dilution of prices and the "offer some, give, none" strategy (with the comma as a cunning indicator of a merely formal and illusory boundary between the verb "give" and its complementation "none"). The representative concludes that "it is easy to make a country prosperous" by keeping "blindness forever in hand on hand proverb". Thus the proverbiality of language, the means to maintaining the individual's calibration, is directly connected to deception. It is necessary to keep the masses in the dark so as to delude them into thinking that everything is "blue and bright over". This point is stated earlier in the poem, "glinted horizons so/ blue and bright forever we say, pinching the/ promised drip […]" (Prynne 2005: 553). Here, the setting is metonymically shown to be a hospital where a patient is administered a "promised drip". As he is taking the artificial sustenance, the patient is being convinced that everything will be fine, and that his horizon, the prospects for recovery, is bright.

The repetition of the message of solace, like the "hand on hand proverb", is to "pacify rag hands". Such proverbial phrases recur throughout the poem always to show that big business is not to blame for whatever dire straits the "rag hands" are in.

> […] Matter
> boiling or livid hand-grip resumes instant release
> panoply catchment and swells infected to barter
>
> refit clauses, bitten all over. Don't make sores if
> you can't pay to dress their origin, a globe toll
> spoiling for animus. Step to the bar. Be a credit
> witness. Speak real slow and with pauses […]. (Prynne 2005: 557)

The stanza, one of the more direct in the sequence, is constructed around several metonymies. The "refit clauses" may refer to the central powers that command the "proper idiom". As the language has been "bitten all over" it must now be refitted.

The "clauses" also connotes the legal aspect of the central control that must be phrased so that there is no risk of liability. Once refitted, the "clauses" show that whatever discontent or legal trouble has come on the people, it is their fault because they have "made sores" that they cannot afford to "dress". Literally, the "sores" denote physical wounds that may result from the people's physical clash with one another; figuratively, the fragment suggests an association of "sores" with any kind of challenge (for example legal) to the central powers. In both cases the people are found to be unable to pay either for the treatment or to accept reconciliation. As a result, the "globe toll", an ingenious metonym for what may refer to the central power's universal taxation, is "spoiling for animus". That phrase invites several possible readings.

Firstly, it suggests a bellicose attitude of the "globe toll" towards those on whom it was imposed. Secondly, it implies that the company are deliberately stirring up ill feeling among people in order to further their own business. Another point is that "animus" may also refer to the male aspect of the soul, which would emphasise the fact that what is at stake in this power play is a person's soul. Immediately following the phrase, the instances of legal jargon indicate that the trial has already started and it takes place in the "correct grammar" of the "refitted clauses". In this context, the workers are dumbfounded; to be understood, they need to "speak real slow and with pauses" as though their language was not clear enough for the judge to understand. In addition, like the Herbertian chronicler, what the defendants must supply is facts —not emotions or speculations, and certainly not conjectures— that must conform to the centre's proverbial "word order", in which they are immediately put at a disadvantage.

In his sequence, Prynne topples the hegemony of the "correct grammar" in favour of a language "self-disputing and intrinsically dialectical" (Prynne 2010: 599). No line in *Biting the Air*, or indeed in any of Prynne's poems, stands as a separate assertion. Ming Xie points out this aspect of Prynne's language, observing in relation to a poem from *Pearls that Were* (1999) that Prynnean verbs are "'transitional' and interactive in function" (Xie 2012: 190). Thus the difficulty of Prynne's poetry lies in the multiplicity of often contradictory meanings that the "interactive words" in a poem summon and keep up with no dialectical resolution. It is such a negative dialectic that it is bound to destabilize the simple logic of calibration. Signification is not only the product of a grammatically proper arrangement of lexis, but a result of complex associative correlations of various meanings that hover about each succeeding line. That process of meaning-formation is captured by Nicholas Royle in his idea of "veering", "there is exercise *and* loss of control, exercise *and* loss of self" (2011: 23; emphasis in the original). It is between these two irreconcilable poles that a

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poem happens, calling into question "the very notion of possibility of state, of stability or stabilization" (Royle 2011: 7).

This, however, is not to say that as a result of decalibrating the language, no meaning can be gleaned from the poem. Decalibration is inextricably linked to recalibration that demands a different attention to meaning-formation. As has been shown throughout the present reading, *Biting the Air* returns to a series of stories of conflict between the hegemonic discourse of logic and various means to dismantle that discourse. The dismantling consists in creating meaning by assembling images of qualitative similarity as in this important stanza:

> Assert parallel imports under licence at baseline
> emergency exits turnstile one-way. Within protected
> gray markets to get what's coming is patent
> wrist flexure daunted, prosthetic flavine […]. (Prynne 2005: 562)

On the one hand the stanza deploys images of fixing: legally asserting the right and ensuring that an exit leads one way only. On the other, however, this fixity is set against suggestions that what appear to be acts of order-maintenance prove dangerous to health: the word "patent" in the penultimate line plays on two meanings, depending on whether it is seen in the context of the line alone or whether it is carried over to the next line. Thus it may refer to "a licence from a government to an individual or organization conferring for a set period the sole right to make, use or sell some process or invention" ("Patent" *NSOED*) if read solely in the penultimate line; or, as adjective, it may be used to mean "open to view, exposed, manifest, evident obvious". It can also denote "a stage in a parasitic infection: characterised by detectable parasitic organisms or cysts in the tissues or faeces of the host" ("Patent" *NSOED*) if viewed in the context of "wrist flexure daunted" that in itself is ambiguous, suggesting both that the wrist has been injured in the act of flexing or, as "flexure daunted", an act of overtaxing the process of brain development in a vertebrate embryo. Both meanings indicate a peril to one's health, and so suggest that seeking to "assert parallel import under licence" of a "patent" is an act of violation. Thus the stanza yields images that thematise a conflict but does so through dense deployment of interrelated images that challenge the proverbiality of language.

The pervasive irony in *Biting the Air* is that the "proper language" of the centre, urging the hegemony of simplified and clichéd discourse, has already been "ratted". The infestation of our vocabulary with phrases such as "speak slow and with pauses" or "horizons are blue and bright forever" forces on us a certain mode of thinking that is conducive to stimulating an increase in the deadly capital. Just as Eric Packer eventually turns out to be a prisoner of his charts that

follow a logic of their own, so the capital owners in *Biting the Air*, playing out the logic of truth regime described by Foucault, are imprisoned in the discourse they came to propound in the first place; as a result "There's time and not much to say". People become passers-by in a de-individualized and emotionally barren world where strained silence or clichéd exchanges of phatic expressions prove dominant.

One of the sections of the poem opens with an unexpected and rather incongruous affirmation, "Yes, why is it like this not even hand-set like/ a headline reduction […]" (Prynne 2005: 558). The first line invokes the "Yeses" which started each sentence in the exchange between Packer and Chin. In the stanza, a suggestion is made that the current state of affairs, "not even hand-set like", must be accepted. Little is "hand-set" because "The data best/ muddy enforce their source" (Prynne 2005: 559). The proximity between "best" and "muddy" may imply that the best data is muddy data. However, the two adjectives are separated by a line ending. The line break strikes one as rather arbitrary, which seems to underline the strained cover-up of the plain fact that nobody controls the flow of data that now "enforce their source". The jarring and intrusive rhyme of "enforce" and "source" on the one hand indicates the inanity of the fact that the data themselves assert their own source rather than being gleaned from that source by the human agent; on the other hand it seeks to beguile us into believing that only by force can the source be known. After a comma we learn that the data would at best "attribute wouldn't they" (Prynne 2005: 559), but what they ought to attribute remains obscure. It may be their source, but what would it be attributed to? Possibly, the emphasis is laid on lessening the strained effect of "enforcing their source". If that were the case, the data would still furtively aim at their own self-preservation, but instead of "enforcing their source", they only obliquely, albeit no less insistently, attribute it to what cannot be pinned down. With the indirect suggestion of "tribute" lurking inside "attribute", such elusiveness of the data is implied to be their strength.

Towards the end of the sequence, it becomes ever more evident that the data —the discourse that feeds itself to the users, who are too struck with "delusion and incompetence" to understand that emphasis has shifted from them as individual holders of power to the language that binds them— constitute the source of oppression. "Frame your hand deal it/ nothing curative beyond oppression" (Prynne 2005: 562). The hand must be framed before it can "deal it" because the deal can only be clinched provided it is negotiated within the limits of a given discourse by which everyone must abide. A "hand" that "deals" also evokes also gambling, with its implications of greed and hopes of easy money. However, this path can only lead to being "framed" and eventually

"oppressed". It is a painful irony that pursuit of wealth causes the "hand" to submit to "the cure of oppression" in order to survive.

Moreover, the singular "framed hand" is directly opposed to the above-mentioned many "rag hands" that are to be pacified, which further underscores the idea that the centre is simultaneously the agent and the product of framing that suggests calibration in the proverbial, "ratted discourse". In response to this "ratted", capital-biased singularity, *Biting the Air* offers what has been called "veering", which resists final apprehension and stabilisation. Between individual words meanings proliferate. Therefore trying to decide on a single reading of *Biting the Air* would lead, as the title suggests, to forcing a frame on a limitless ethereal potential of language to disseminate often contradictory meanings. The "ratted disourse" thrives on such impositions, turning people into well-adjusted cogs in the machinery of modernity. It is against this infestation that Prynne's sequence of poems speaks. Each section of *Biting the Air* becomes an outpost of an idiom that seeks to rupture its stability, to decalibrate itself, thereby offering a challenge to the singularity of the "ratted discourse", and showing the inanity of all frames.

Prynne's sequence figures a language by no means in ruins, in which one can cling to spectral memories of Herbertian temples and gardens, but rather an energetic space of meaning dispersal and reconfiguration that can resist the idea of a singular centre that, as Eric Packer believes, will always "chart". Rather than seek spiritual redemption that must inevitably bring catastrophe, Prynne destabilizes what he understands to be the source of modern plight: the calcified idioms of the market that have come to dominate the world. In lieu of replicating the accepted discourse, Prynne posits constant poetic composition and decomposition, "new poetic thought" in the process of becoming.

Notes

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1. The idea that the modern man is entangled in the discourses of modernity has been present in Prynne's books from the beginning, although with time the poet's response to this entanglement has changed. Rod Mengham, analysing "L'Extase de M. Poher", shows that by colliding poetry with specialised discourses such as biology or law the poem effects "the displacement of the subject of anthropological humanism", which is intricated, or embroiled, in those discourse (Mengham 2009: 72–73). Furthermore, Reeve and Kerridge note that "in order to survive, poetry has to 'collide' with the powerful instrumental discourses of the culture (smashing them into pieces), rather than dodging into alley-ways while they pass, or lingering in safe places like gardens" (Reeve and Kerridge 1995: 9).

[2]. The poem was written partly in response to the imposition of Martial Law on Poland on 13 December 1981.

[3]. Like other poems of his from the 70s and 80s, Herbert's lyric echoes Walter Benjamin's perception of history as catastrophe that is expressed in Benjamin's interpretation of Paul Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" that, "his face […] turned toward the past" and back turned to the future, "sees one single catastrophe" which is irresistible (Benjamin 1969: 257–258).

[4]. In this respect Prynne's critical project runs along the rebellious path of feminism as phrased by Hélène Cixous, who argued that the new woman "un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield". Later, she adds that women "take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down" (Cixous 2001: 2046, 2051). Although Prynne may be as enthusiastic about the engagement of feminism as Eagleton was in his Afterword to *Literary Theory*, he would be reluctant to acknowledge the subjectivism and the desire for freedom that Cixous and many other theoreticians of the movement have espoused.

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