

## INTRODUCTION

Ryan Dobran

In the ‘Preface’ to *Daybreak*, Friedrich Nietzsche states his preference for *lento*, for what Roman Jakobson would pass along to his students as the definition of philology: slow reading.<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche writes: “For philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow—it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the *word* which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it *lento*. But for precisely this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it entice and enchant us the most, in the midst of an age of ‘work,’ that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once, including every old or new book....”<sup>2</sup> There is no mistaking this model of devotion, which presumably inheres to all good philological readers: the physiological intimacy with the texts, reading with recursive parafovea, attending to obscurity with curiosity and research; all of these approximate a rough ethics of thinking the text, rather than about the text as a completed or completable event. Nietzsche’s critique of the ‘present-moment’ figure, whose speedy “work” must hasten to meet the mass allotment of task, whose epitomization of sameness would later become un-lost in the illusory image-mediation of Debord’s spectacle, is also a call for commentarial labor, which invokes the pleasure of the text, as much as it enhances perceptivity and description of those yet unmarked

<sup>1</sup> Calvert Watkins reports this in his brief contribution, “What is Philology?”, to *On Philology*, ed. Jan Ziolkowski (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1990), 21-25 [25]. See also his “New Parameters in Historical Linguistics, Philology and Culture History” *Language* 65.4 (1989): 783-799.

<sup>2</sup> *Daybreak* [*Morgenrote*, 1886], trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 5.

potentialities into which reading may move, pre-articulate feeling born of pre-representation, prior to the delimitation of paraphrasis and readerly introjection. If the slow reading of the philologist aims to complicate presumed epistemological achievement, knowledge as circumscribed locus for the residence of belief, then the speed-reading of the sensationalist requires the ideological vacuity of that which can never begin, for its historical valency is anoxic; in remission without desire for truth-claims, it bites the first idea it thinks, sloughing off the pressures of precision for quotidian *ressentiment*. While interpretation can end, commentary is endless.<sup>3</sup>

The argument made implicit by the present volume is that the genre of commentary allows for an engagement of J.H. Prynne's poems not to be had in the conventions of contemporary academic methodology, whose forms often foreclose the development of lengthy meditations on single texts. The volume was partially prompted by Prynne's own commentarial practice.<sup>4</sup> How articulate would such thoughtful reviews of the "struggle to fix the sense"<sup>5</sup> be when placed upon Prynne's own poems? How might commentary

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see Hans Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 41-44. See also Nicola Masciandaro, "Becoming Spice: Commentary as Geophilosophy," *Collapse* 6 (2010): 20-56.

<sup>4</sup> See the two lengthy studies by Prynne: *They that have powre to hurt; A Specimen of a Commentary on Shake-speares Sonnets*, 94 (Cambridge [privately-printed], 2001), 86pp. in 32 chapters each devoted to a word or word-grouping in the sonnet; and *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and others* (Cambridge [privately-printed], 2007), 114pp., including a historical and environmental 'mis-en-scène' for Wordsworth's writing of the poem, a gloss on its title, versification and stanza-format, and 'Musical Experience', a brief but radiant discussion of ethnomusicology and sound cognition as it relates to hearing and listening. See also his "Tintern Abbey, Once Again" *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary* 1 (2009): 89-96. The title of Prynne's 2001 commentary, *A Specimen...*, is a tribute to Walter Whiter's 1794 commentary: *A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeare: Containing I. Notes on "As you like it". II. An Attempt to Explain and Illustrate Various Passages, on a New Principle of Criticism, Derived from Mr Locke's Doctrine of the Association of Ideas*. See also Sailendra Kumar Sen, "A Neglected Critic of Shakespeare: Walter Whiter" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13.2 (1962): 173-185.

<sup>5</sup> Prynne, *They that have powre to hurt; A Specimen of a Commentary on Shake-speares Sonnets*, 94 (Cambridge [privately-printed], 2001), 39.

exfuse previously unheard and unseen particulars, disrupt tendencies of previous Prynne criticism, and collate simple and complex ways of thinking about the *Poems*? More generally, what capacities does commentary offer to the reader of modern poetry, vis-à-vis its premodern literary, philosophical, and religious traditions? Insofar as Prynne's poems often invoke the inbetweenness of multiple sense-constitution<sup>6</sup> and confuse simulative invention and discursive reference, it seems as though a scholarship predicated on the loving rehabilitation of historicized and fundamentally ambiguous textuality might offer some spatio-temporal coordinates for fine reading. Does commentary then limit itself to falsely restituting the remaining 'fragment' of a whole poem, which, (perhaps) unlike its ancient forebears, was never actually whole, not even in the poet's mind, prior to its written composition? This entanglement, whether a poem *is* prior to its being written down, published, or read, provides a subterranean measure to much commentarial speculation, even when questions of textual authority are avoided entirely. The critical form generated in response to the text's variable mental array reflects these problems of text assessment. Does commentary then perform only an "ancillary" function to interpretation?<sup>7</sup> Is philology (the love of words/language/literature) only the "configuration of scholarly skills that are geared toward historical text curatorship"?<sup>8</sup> Might it not also

<sup>6</sup> "The multiplicity of the senses does not produce equivocation or any other kind of multiplicity, seeing that these senses are not multiplied because one word signifies several things, but because the things signified by the words can be themselves signs of other things" Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1a.1.10 in *Basic Writings*, ed. Anton Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945) vol. 1, 17; quoted by Gerald Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 141. Compare Charles Sanders Peirce's description of precision in the signification of other such things or objects: "The Objects—for a Sign may have any number of them—may each be a single known existing thing or thing believed formerly to have existed or expected to exist, or a collection of such things, or a known quality or relation or fact, which single Object may be a collection, or whole of parts, or it may have some other mode of being, such as some act permitted whose being does not prevent its negation from being equally permitted, or something of a general nature desired, required, or invariably found under certain general circumstances" from "Logic as Semiotic" in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 101.

<sup>7</sup> Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology*, 2.

require, as Prynne's poly-discursive engagements suggest, a holistic inquiry into what is known and can be known, the very limits of human intelligibility?<sup>9</sup>

In an unpublished essay from 1929, Ezra Pound remarked: "one of the diseases of contemporary thought (and probably running back 100 years or more) is due to the loss of making commentaries. I mean marginal commentary on important texts."<sup>10</sup> And this from the same hand:

<sup>9</sup> See the nineteenth-century philologist August Boeckh's definitions of philology: "We do affirm that the aim and concept of philology lie higher—that it furnishes a training which must fill the spirit not merely with ideas about grammar, but with every kind of ideas, an inclusiveness which alone comprehends the actual signification of philological studies"; and the even more inspired: "The genuine activity of philology seems, then, to be the understanding of what has been produced by the human spirit, the understanding of what is known"; both quotations from Boeckh, *On Interpretation & Criticism*, trans. and ed. John Paul Pritchard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 7, 8. [Partial trans. of Boeckh's *Encyclopaedie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* [1877], second ed. (Berlin: B.G. Teubner, 1886).] Giorgio Agamben, in a manifesto on the contemporary necessity of philology, writes "The abolition of the margin between the thing to be transmitted and the act of transmission, and between writing and authority, has in fact been philology's role since the very beginning"; he also notes that at each historical renewal of philology, poets have been compelled to become philologists (e.g. Philetas, Petrarch, F. Schlegel...). "Project for Review" in *Infancy and History* [1978], trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 143-150 [146]. On the importance of philological thinking in Prynne's early poetry, see Keston Sutherland, "J.H. Prynne and Philology" PhD Diss. (University of Cambridge, 2004), esp. 81ff.

<sup>10</sup> This excerpt from Pound's unpublished "Collected Prose" project of 1929-1930 cited from Ira B. Nadel, "Visualizing History: Pound and the Chinese Cantos" in *A Poem Containing History: Textual Studies in The Cantos*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 152. For Pound and philology, see Victor P.H. Li, "Philology and Power: Ezra Pound and the Regulation of Language" *boundary 2* 15.1/2 (1986-87): 187-210; Carlos Riobó, "The Spirit of Ezra Pound's Romance Philology: Dante's Ironic Legacy of the Contingencies of Value" *Comparative Literature Studies* 39.3 (2002): 201-222; Ch. 3 of Jerome McGann, *Social Values and Poetic Acts: The Historical Judgment of a Literary Work* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 50-72; Chs. 5 and 6 of McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 101-152.

dead maggots begetting live maggots,  
slum owners,  
usurers squeezing crab-lice, pandars to authority,  
pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books,  
obscuring the texts with philology,  
hiding them under their persons,<sup>11</sup>

It is this tension (some might say contradiction) between knowledge and culture that pulls on Pound's critique of deceit, opportunism and stupidity in the *Cantos*, which requires the mind of an enthusiastic glossator and post-glossator to get through its distortions, translations and marginalia, to confront the resistance of what is not yet known, what must be learned as an extension of the aesthetic experience of the text itself. The difficult terrain confronts the limits of practical reading, for the effects of being 'lost'—the glossator's exilic romance—are effects of liminality, the changing of epistemological rites. Pound's autoglossing represents textual collage as non-narrative historical expression.

Charles Olson is another example of a poet of the 20th century interested in the relationship between textuality and knowing, representative of a Poundian desire for historical expression, though perhaps without the premodern *luce* of E.P.'s learned masks. Taking a cue from the pedagogy of Pound's *ABC of Reading*, Olson, as poet-teacher (poet-scholar would be a strong usage) wrote didactic poems, constructed diagrammatic bibliographies, and seemingly maintained a narrow, at times transparent, line between his poetry and his prose.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Ezra Pound, "Canto XIV" [1930] *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 63.

<sup>12</sup> Some didactic poems include the three ABCs: "A B Cs", "A B Cs (2)", "A B Cs (3—for Rimbaud)" [1950] in *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson; Excluding the Maximus poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 171-175. The most well-known example of such a bibliography is "A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn" [1955] in Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 297-310 [first published as a pamphlet by Four Seasons, 1964]; see pp. 435-441 for editorial notes and commentary. Compare J.H. Prynne's more conventional and comprehensive challenge of 120 items, also distributed c. 1964 (perhaps as a rejoinder): *Some Works Containing Discussion of Scientific and*

Prynne's own early philological commitments were documented in his prose and poem contributions to *The English Intelligencer* (1966-1968), particularly the etymological array, "A Pedantic Note, in Two Parts", and the two poems which conclude with a list of references: "The Glacial Question, Unsolved" and "Aristeas, In Seven Years".<sup>13</sup> While there is some shadow-consensus about the stylistic upheaval that *Brass* (1971) represents, it seems clear, at least to a reader of his prose, that the philological commitments are not simply relinquished, but reformulated, if not intensified.<sup>14</sup> The aforementioned poems trail a didactic invitation for commentary. The "References" and "Notes" pages make detailed historical evidence and contemporaneous attestations in geology and anthropology part of poetic argument, and can not be mistaken for the occasional diletantism of a poet like Olson. These interventions of poetic knowledge were orchestrations of research, competed with the claims of scientific realism, and brought into practice the desire for stating "the orphic metaphor / [3] *as fact*".<sup>15</sup>

*Christian Time, History, and Causal Explanation* [1964], Edward Dorn Papers, Box 19, Folder 327, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. (Thanks to Justin Katko for furnishing a copy.) On the cohabitation of prosaic and poetic sensibility in Olson's work, Robert von Hallberg comments: "a case can be made that a study of [Olson's] poetics should logically precede an examination of his poetry" in his *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard UP, 1978), 1.

<sup>13</sup> "A Pedantic Note, in Two Parts" *The English Intelligencer* [TEI] (2nd series, 1967, 346-351), "The Glacial Question, Unsolved" *TEI* (1st series, 1966, 69-70), "Aristeas, in Seven Years" *TEI* (2nd series, 1967, 276-279).

<sup>14</sup> For an extension of a philological poetics into the domain of historical phonology, see Prynne's recent "Mental Ears and Poetic Work" *Chicago Review* 55.1 (2010), 126-157. See Sutherland in the present volume for an investigation of the socio-political inertia of *Brass*; see also the early discussion by David Trotter, "A Reading of Prynne's BRASS" *PN Review* 5.2 ["number 6"] (1978): 49-53.

<sup>15</sup> Prynne, "Aristeas, in Seven Years" in *Poems* (Fremantle, AU: Fremantle Arts Centre Press; Northumberland, UK: Bloodaxe, 2005), 90-96 [92]. This quotation is the predicate of what the "spirit demanded", and echoes the opening lines of part II of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" [1920]: "The age demanded an image / Of its accelerated grimace" in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1990), 186. On Prynne and science, see especially Roebuck and Sperling, Stone-Richards, and Katko in the present volume, as well as

Before this writing period of 1966-1972, which comprises over 200 pages of the *Poems*, and less than a year before the publication of his first book of poems, *Force of Circumstance*, Prynne published an erudite, concise review of the twins resistance and difficulty (and their respective kin, substance and process) in *Prospect*, a small Cambridge poetry journal. “Resistance and Difficulty” (1961) focused on bridging Scholastic philosophy and phenomenology, and moved swiftly from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty, all in five pages, quotations in French, German and Latin, no notes.<sup>16</sup> The paraphrase from the American critic R.P. Blackmur about the capacity for poetry to increase the availability of the world’s reality, the subtle affirmation of Heideggerian *Kunstwerk* in the face of impending instrumentalization, and the dénouement from Rilke’s *Duineser Elegien* suggested that poetry is particularly suited to types of substantial and imaginative experience not available in discourse, that there is something of the poem as an independent part of reality that lays claim to a modality of attention and encounter. It is no coincidence that it would later be characteristic of Prynne criticism to attend to the question of difficulty in poetry, often as a means of assessing apparent obscurity and hermeticism. Without the presentation of resistance as generative of difficulty, however, the latter becomes the source rather than the means of objectivity, it becomes a merely topological subjectivity.<sup>17</sup> In

Drew Milne, “The Art of Wit and the Cambridge Science Park.” *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, ed. Robert Crawford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 170-187. See also Simon Jarvis, “Quality and the non-identical in J.H. Prynne’s ‘Aristeas, in seven years’” *Jacket* 20 (Dec 2002) <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pt-jarvis.html>.

<sup>16</sup> J.H. Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty” *Prospect* 5 (Winter 1961): 26-30.

<sup>17</sup> For a more extensive discussion of ‘difficulty’ in Prynne’s work of the late 1960s and early 1970s, see esp. two articles by Simon Jarvis: “Quality and the non-identical in J.H. Prynne’s ‘Aristeas, in seven years’” *Jacket* 20 (Dec 2002) <http://jacketmagazine.com/20/pt-jarvis.html>; and “Clear as Mud: J.H. Prynne’s ‘Of Sanguine Fire’” *Jacket* 24 (Nov 2003), <http://jacketmagazine.com/24/jarvis.html>. On ‘resistance’, see D.S. Marriot, “Contemporary British Poetry and Resistance: Reading J.H. Prynne” *Parataxis: modernism and modern writing* 9 (1996): 159-174. But see also Douglas Oliver, “J.H. Prynne’s ‘Of Movement Towards a Natural Place’” *Grosseteste Review* 9 (1979): 93-102 for critical remarks on how such difficulty becomes pathologized (and for commentary on a single poem). For a recent attempt to articulate the experience of difficulty in Prynne’s poetry, see David Punter, “Interlocating J.H. Prynne” *Cambridge Quarterly* 31.2 (2002): 121-137.

the essay, the question of whether a phenomenology of resistance and its surface expression—difficulty—may be conceived as a ‘poetics’, that is, as a public registration of explicit priorities and intended developments, was carefully and obliquely inlaid. Difficulty is contrived to be an end in itself only to those willful of avant-garde agonism,<sup>18</sup> however beautifully and productively. Resistance, however, affirms what is not only artificial, but substantial and given. The “substantial medium” of the artist and the “body” of the experiencing subject, both dynamic between consciousness and the world, are aligned, and the special ability of the imagination “to admit, draw sustenance from, and celebrate the ontological priority of the outside world, by creating entities which subsequently become a part of the world, an addition to it”<sup>19</sup> reorganizes the dialectic between idealism and realism. If the “mind’s exertions are constitutive of the world’s reality”<sup>20</sup> then there can only be difficulty, whereas resistance is the closest “differentiable quality to being completely inherent in the object”.<sup>21</sup> The autonomy of poetic textuality, far from alleviating itself of the world, adds to the ontological priority of the world by revealing the incommensurability between perception and the world, invention and reference. Commentary is the closest approximation to establishing the priority and substance of such poetic textuality.

Insofar as *Glossator 2* projects an attitude of what Prynne criticism can be, it stops short of prescription, for the domain of commentary itself is a collective of decentered and asymmetrical approaches, and must be adaptable to the needs and preferences of its user and text-focus, if it is to sustain itself as a context for thinking and writing, rather than pedantic orthodoxy. Indeed, one of the allures of Prynne’s poetry is its dismantling of method; it seems to open and close doors before entry and after exit. If significance requires commitment, then the commentator commits not to predict an orchestration of meaning in the text, nor to organize the data in a general thesis, but works

<sup>18</sup> On ‘agonism’ in the avant-garde, see the classic study by Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 65ff.

<sup>19</sup> Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty”, 30.

<sup>20</sup> Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty”, 29

<sup>21</sup> Prynne, “Resistance and Difficulty”, 28



through and follows the text.<sup>22</sup> The peculiar labor of the commentary is a mixture of scrupulousness, resourcefulness, tensile speculation, and suspicion. It risks moving too slow, of overstating the obvious, of beginning at the beginning, and returning when necessary. By its own movement, it directs the reading of the poem, and slows the left-to-right cognition, excurring to develop points of importance. Only a few of the commentaries in this volume operate under the sequential, word-by-word conditions of the *scholia* tradition, akin to Prynne's own work in this area.

The reader will note the proclivity of the commentaries in this volume towards the work of the late 1960s and 1970s, with the exception of Wilkinson on *Word Order* (1989). Although *The White Stones*, *Brass*, and *Wound Response* lend themselves particularly well to source-hunting, especially in these times of digitization and searchable media, the facility of such tools does not ease the relation between referential deixis and knowledge fulfilment within the poem, and does not mean clarity in the sense of transparency,<sup>23</sup> so that the object of research becomes a fungible touchpoint, acquiescent under any number of equivocatory glosses. Often it seems that the fulfilment or supplementation of quotations or specialized vocabulary by commentary only deepens the sense of their embeddedness; once extracted and commented upon, they do not fit back into their original places.

The commentaries are ordered according to the chronology of their primary text-focus, although there are many local and distant cross-comparisons throughout. We have not chosen to include an appendix of the total poetic work cited herein for the purpose of readerly consultation in a single volume. Therefore, we strongly recommend that the full texts of Prynne's poems, whether in original

<sup>22</sup> The notion of language requiring commitment for significance was emphasized, for instance, by Wittgenstein: "If a word is to have significance, we must commit ourselves", as recorded by G.E. Moore, "Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33" in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, eds. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1993), 46-114 [52].

<sup>23</sup> Nor might we agree with the American poet George Oppen when, instead of transparency, he emphasizes "silence": "Clarity // In the sense of transparency / I don't mean that much can be explained // Clarity in the sense of silence." from section 22 of *Of Being Numerous* (1967) in *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 162.

or reprinted form, be within the periphery of vision or memory for the reading of this volume, which depends upon the primacy of poetic textuality<sup>24</sup> for its intended precision and stability, especially as these commentaries are replete with a working familiarity of the poems and circulate in implicit regard inside and outside them, on distant shores of abstraction, and outline latent back-formations to suggest

If you set your mind to it, the words  
 tell you the first levels are free ones,  
 only the end is fixed by its need  
 to be freely led up to. And for me  
 all levels are held but the last,  
 the parting shot I don't dream of  
 but see every day. Then you buy  
 another notebook, scissors vanish  
 and the spiral binding shews justly  
 the force of even intervals.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Compare Willard McCarty, "Commentary in an Electronic Age?": "By definition commentary depends on its object, but the relationship between the two is more complex than simple dependency suggests. The key to the relationship lies in a paradox of interpretation, which takes control of and to a varying degree remakes its object in the very act of its own subservience. The commentary is thus in a sense always primary. Some commentaries are plainly so because they straightforwardly create or constitute their objects. Some are primary by default—they are all that remains of an event not otherwise recorded or an object which has not survived" in *The Classical Commentary*, eds. Roy K. Gibson and Christina Kraus Shuttleworth (London and Köln: Brill, 2002), 359-402 [363]. Contrast Gumbrecht's less paradoxical but more spatially grounded relationship of 'laterality' between commentary and object: "It is this contiguity between the commentator's text and the text on which to comment that explains why the material form of the commentary depends on and has to adapt to the material form of the commented-on text", in *The Powers of Philology*, 44.

<sup>25</sup> Final section "Bolt" from *Vernal Aspects* in Prynne, *Poems*, 274.