

3A.

New to some rubble discontented in other eyes
for sure vibrant resentment crack up the harvest floral to its
amination, afforded when wet at gated hedge entrance. This play
or a Broad dissipate sentence bell hammer stirred of food even
Profusion. The molecule is generally pandemic, indecision layered
off by step quanta or this or less hit. (Got what it is, for who is it
force fielded, spectra reversed) another day other be calm all at
call to omisage. Nothing that is not nothing will do it, access
a vacuum refered by its container, from inside to size placed out
interdict risen forbes narrow alert summation vectorial inboxes.
So alternated position even integral even averaged through time.
The cause of sequence presumed its afterbirths I saw being
risen so later on yet lateral buds implect by intrinsic foiled
necessity, not to be is not already or yet not reflex in
temper of state to be a stream of what can be known in view,
not by you but for your line to be sure each vacant by each
the other or mine.

honest
fried

Phenoma

MAO There is internal contradiction in every single thing,
hence its motion and development. Contradictoriness within
a thing is the fundamental cause of its development, while its
interrelations and interactions with other things are
secondary cause. . . . It is evident that purely external
cause can only give rise to mechanical motion, that is, to
changes in scale or quantity, but cannot explain why
one thing changes into another. As a matter of fact, even
mechanical motion under external force occurs through
the internal contradictoriness of things. Simple growth in
plants and animals, their quantitative development, is
wholly chiefly the result of their internal contradictions.

Is mine or mine, or is as ones all so, also, dialectic and Profuse,
delusive upwards avoided: what is not this is that's not, glowing ever
in time of unit change recircled, I saw seeing itself dissolve rail
to contest bounded, to scale by inversion not ~~quite~~ vented out to
porous incline, a quantum ledge of hour interstitial exclusion. Thus
being itself delects its nominal selfhood, the name illicit as conjured
only by negated states do not coming to be or relinquished, the inclusion
of un-never at contradicted mutable edging (Can this be was it for
this incision in dropsy you not ventral ~~and~~ asserted sold
OUT for mac song. Knee retrieval, give way with no-name in
appearance seeking as a swarm of gnats in soft summer sun
at the edge of the oakwood forest infolded not time after time,
still less perpetual by false appearance which is the true semblance
or falsity, indured and ever-Doubtful. Our morning hymn this is,
and song at evening, echo confuted by shared antagonism, implicit
not by coming to be as the world is transformed in feature full of folk
by what it is not, time-locked against spokes in the cycle of saying oo,
indicative ridiculous also, won't you come home Bill Bailey
before the taking of a toast and tea, scumbargo! Hypoites! The old
folks better just stay at home or lose their reason, mine and yours
leaned against interest, sorts implected by necessity smooth
turning upon an axle you'd not know was not granted its near life
to be there, on-site, I saw no less than these things.

WW

PS

Infjurn

Down
Langford
Langford
SO

For why and over shows that no green bottles be green
and how ~~leaving~~ are they that are not or no longer, how
long is that or not or grades to frequent zero, in
that again each time and how many to remember of the year
Sum of ~~fantasy~~ ~~mis-remembered~~ feelings? None to a Crisp, (don't wash the grow)
Thus many so high they will not come down to hot come not down.

Manu

Braining

by cowardice, replerin boards expiring hit your head on bricks
which are in common knowledge the haunt of accident, of the ten
green bottles lined up to smash, a fable of depletion to zero, foolish
head

A manuscript page from *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is* (2011). "Some of the things I wrote down astonished me. I'd think, Did I write that? Don't ask! Did I mean that? Don't ask! What does it mean for what's going to come next?"

The Art of Poetry No. 101

J. H. PRYNNE

I am not much of a morning person," Jeremy Prynne warned us, as we made arrangements for this interview. "My natural habitat seems to be the hours of darkness, *ad libitum*. So I'll be pretty useless until about ten thirty or eleven A.M. at best: but at the other end of the day I never tire."

So it proved. For four days at the end of January, we met after lunch in his rooms at Gonville and Caius College, at the University of Cambridge, and talked, with a break for dinner, until we pleaded exhaustion sometime after midnight. At the conclusion of each day's interview, Prynne graciously walked us out through the sixteenth-century Gate of Honour before returning to his desk in the rooms he has kept since he was first appointed as a fellow, in 1962.

Prynne's lower room is large and bright and stocked with English literature, its classical forbears, its Continental peers. (On the first day of our

visit, he gave us keys and allowed us to browse in the mornings. Almost every book was annotated in his elegant script.) The upper room is smaller, cozier, and home to American and Chinese literature. Scrolls and framed sheets of calligraphy crowd the shelves. For decades these rooms have been the site of Prynne's supervisions with Cambridge undergraduate and graduate students, on poetry from William Langland to Paul Celan and Frank O'Hara. (His tastes are unexpected and definite.) The rooms have also, over the decades, been a late-night meeting place for local and visiting poets.

Prynne is eighty, and he stands over six feet tall. Each afternoon of our visit, he folded himself into a low easy chair in his upper room and talked candidly and unflaggingly, with genial precision. When amused, he clapped his hands three times in brisk delight; when it occurred to him to show us a book, as it often did, he was up out of his chair to find it before we could stir to help. On the third day of the interview, he gave us a tour of the Gonville and Caius Library, where he served as Librarian of the College from 1969 to 2006.

Prynne published his first book of poems, *Force of Circumstance*, in 1962, and disowned it not long after. His next three books appeared in 1968, and since then he has steadily published a book every year or two. The collections have all appeared in small editions from presses based mainly in Cambridge. As his reputation has grown, the books have maintained a samizdat quality. With the exception of *The White Stones* (1969), which New York Review Books republished this year, they are hard to find. (A bibliography is available at prynnebibliography.org.) In 1982, he collected the books in *Poems*, which has been updated in three subsequent editions. He has also published commentaries, lectures, reviews, and letters on an astonishing array of topics.

Prynne's poetry is powerful and dense. Each book is an experiment, made in a concentrated burst of effort: a mode of writing instigated by the academic calendar, with its rhythm of term and break. The poems investigate the languages of economics and the conditions of inequality; Marx and Mao are important influences. The poems also combine a deep knowledge of science with practical expertise in geology and botany: the devotions of a naturalist are frequently audible. And always there is literature: the history of English poetry, and the collective, global memory of the English language.

During the interview, Prynne often referred to his etymological dictionary (Barnhart's), doubled in bulk by his interleaved notes, citations, and correspondence with the editors of the *OED*. The difficulty of his

language, the liberties of his syntax, and the complexity of his prosody have steadily increased as he approached the volume most discussed here, *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is* (2011). He freely conceded that the poems are not written with the reader in mind. How this can seem a necessary and even generous commitment, of a piece with his career as a dedicated teacher, is one of the mysteries of his poetry.

This is the first substantial interview Prynne has given. The final transcript came to 152,000 words—495 printed pages. At Prynne's insistence, we have rendered his words in their English spellings. He declined to provide photographs. The edited fragment we print here begins during a discussion about a poetry reading that we had just attended together.

—*Jeff Dolven and Joshua Kotin*

PRYNNE

These poems we heard this evening, some of them were quite witty, some of them were adept. But they're all poems written by a poet, and I could do without that. I want a poet to break out of his or her poetic identity, to establish a whole new set of possibilities for the reader and for him- or herself. To hear poems that must have been written by a poet is to find them trapped in the poetic habits from which they originate. There wasn't a poem anywhere in that sequence that I heard that I would have been glad to read for a second time. They're all perfectly okay—humorous, relaxed, and entertaining, and extend his working practise. But they wouldn't do anything for me. You know? I can't imagine why he did them. What was the motive? What was the serious development of his practise that poems like that would help him to find his way to? It didn't seem to be that those questions had any good answers.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the development of your practise. You were an undergraduate here at Cambridge. Tell us about your work with the scholar and poet Donald Davie.

PRYNNE

My teacher when I was a student in my third year was Donald Davie, who was a poet, and we came to know each other quite well. I couldn't say that

I knew him warmly, but I did have a good regard for him because he was a serious scholar. He'd written *Articulate Energy* (1955). He'd written a number of books of poems, all of which I'd studied quite closely. We did work on Pound, we did work on Eliot, we did work on Stevens, we did work on Yeats, and had spirited discussions of each. So the English scene with regard to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poetry was part of our remit. We were active with it. And my interest in American poets flowed out of that.

Davie wanted very much to be a poet. I think he probably knew in his heart of hearts that he actually wasn't a poet, though he cared enough about poetry to commit himself to substantial efforts to develop some way of expanding his own writing practise. He was part of that Movement group of poets who wrote very defensively and traditionally, and Davie's way out of that was to be interested in Eliot. His further way out of it was to be interested in Pound—and to be interested in Pound was not at that time conventional. Robert Conquest and the English Movement poets didn't care much about Pound. He was just too wild. They took example from Eliot because Eliot was a more defensive and traditional mind. His adroitly ironical, evasive temper suited them and their world pretty well, and insofar as that world had important experimental and innovative features, they were largely derived from Empson. Empson had little connection with Eliot and not much interest in Pound, so far as I know. But he was a very individual and eccentric and important figure amongst the writers in that era. Quite important to Davie.

INTERVIEWER

Did Davie introduce you to any younger poets?

PRYNNE

Davie introduced me to the name of Charles Tomlinson. He'd been Tomlinson's teacher when Tomlinson was a student here. An important starting point for Tomlinson as a poet was Wallace Stevens. I had read a little of Stevens as a student before I came into connection with Davie, but there's no doubt that my connection with Davie and through him with Tomlinson opened the door to Stevens as an important writer. That was a significant moment, too, because a world that had previously been occupied more or less exclusively by Pound and Williams now opened to another presence of a

very different kind, a seriously intellectual poet of cerebral focus, committed to an active intelligence of mind. This was quite distinct from anything that I'd found in Pound, or in Creeley, or in Olson, come to that.

Tomlinson was a seriously intelligent poet but he was also a descriptive poet who wrote about the natural scene in a way that Stevens wouldn't do. Of course, that aroused a certain Englishness in me because I knew those landscapes and was party to them and produced by them. Not from Tomlinson's part of the world, but nonetheless, it was a very English kind of activity. So reading that and reading Stevens and starting to think about composing poems offered a great number of competing possibilities all converging upon each other.

My early writing habits were not very distinctive. I would write these poems. I can't say they gave me much satisfaction. I wrote them as best I knew how. When I'd done them, I thought, Well, they're all I can do, up to this moment.

INTERVIEWER

These are the poems in *Force of Circumstance*, your first book?

PRYNNE

Now I'm in danger of confabulating. By the time *Force of Circumstance* was being prepared for publication, I'd fallen out of love with it. I would probably have suppressed it if it had been a practical possibility at the time. It had some of Davie's fingerprints on it, it had some of Tomlinson's fingerprints. It had a few other facile fingerprints of my own on it. If this was being a poet, it was not a very inviting idea. Here I'm probably inventing, but I did have the sense then that if I didn't start, wherever best I could, I would never go on. I had to start somewhere. It was going to be uncomfortable, disorderly, imitative, facile, foolish, childish—but I had to put this stuff down and do all these things because otherwise I'd never get past the starting block. I just had to go through the formalities of putting it into the outside world for readers to look at, and turn up their lips at, as I would, too, if I were one of its readers. Think of the very young Keats! Because I'd got to get past this point, and there was no other way to get past it. I had to work my way through, almost like the psychoanalytic process, and have the extremely uncomfortable experience of being an incompetent beginner.

With my best and not even particularly advanced critical reading self, I could see perfectly well that this work was not distinctive. It was imitative, and it didn't have much in the way of strong possibilities. I was seeing all this strong possibility in the Don Allen anthology, but I knew I wasn't going to be able to tune into that in a very convincing way because the English nature of the English language and its English resources inhibited that transfer. It was not a transfer that could be made just like that. So being a poet at that stage was very discomfiting.

INTERVIEWER

What were your initial impressions of Allen's 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry*?

PRYNNE

My copy was paperback and it fell to pieces out of intensive use. It became a loose-leaf assemblage because the back strip collapsed. It was not by any means just the star items that I read, I read Robert Duncan, I read of course all the Creeley items and the Olson items. But there was a lot of other material there. Kerouac, for example, wrote about automatic writing, and it was all completely new territory—I'd never seen anything like it before. What's more, it was full of energy and wackiness and innovation, and none of the English writers I had any knowledge of would ever have committed themselves to behaviour like that. It was not what authors were supposed to do. Being an author, certainly being a poet, was defensive and traditional and habit-forming, and Eliot and Yeats were the chief formative presences. Auden was around the place and was a slightly dangerous author. The Donald Allen anthology seemed to be a completely different world.

It wasn't exactly that the ideas or the arguments registered strongly with me. It was that the energy and innovativeness and newness of outlook, and the experiments with forms, prosodies, rhythms, and matters of presentation, including the whole *mise-en-page*, were completely unprecedented in English practise at the time. To break up the presence of the word forms across the page and to distribute them according to rhythm and emphasis was unprecedented in British habit.

INTERVIEWER

After you graduated from Cambridge in 1960, you spent some time at Harvard?

PRYNNE

I was in America on this cracked-up studentship. It was a curious affair because it was rather grand, and I got it after some complicated and demanding interviews—but it didn't do very much in the way of income. I was impoverished as a student in America. I couldn't travel, I couldn't buy books, I couldn't do anything very much. I didn't have any money, which suited me fine, but I led a very isolated life. Popping in and out of the library and doing my stuff, I had a chance to assimilate some of my previous educational experiences and to reflect on what I was going to do if I was going to do any more writing and what kind of writing it was going to be. Grave isolation was quite significantly useful for that purpose.

I used to have my meals in an automat. I liked automats because they were completely impersonal. You just opened the small door and took out the plate and that was what you ate, you know. I remember thinking, I have rather few personal connections in this world. How far through this world could I go without exchanging a spoken word? Without any force, you know, just not actually speaking when you didn't need to. My record was two and a half weeks. And this automat was one way of dispensing with chatter in mealtime. So I did have an isolated life. It was useful to me. I enjoyed it well.

INTERVIEWER

But you did have contact with people at Harvard?

PRYNNE

At Harvard, I met Cid Corman, a minorish writer of that era. I don't remember quite how I met him. Probably in Gordon Cairnie's Grolier Poetry Book Shop. Corman was the editor of *Origin*, the notable journal that he assembled and published and circulated. It was never circulated at cost. It was sent to selected recipients who were serious about the content. He started to send issues to me, and we met quite frequently and had talks. He was a very didactic man. Very serious in a not altogether comfortable way. Very censorious about my priggish habits. Justly so, I would say, probably. He was tolerant, and he was humorous enough to overlook some of the absurdities

of my priggishness. Nonetheless, it was a task he set himself to abridge these strange habits I had brought with me from England.

I remember, for example, that there was to be a reading on the campus by this man called Snodgrass. Corman said we should go. And I said, Why, is Snodgrass an interesting writer? Corman said no. I said, Why should we go? And he said, Precisely because he's not an interesting writer. It will be an object lesson for you, to see how a boring writer can make extremely boring headway with potentially interesting material, and to watch the wonderful language reduced to ashes in the hands of a facile and imitative and uninteresting writer. This should open your eyes a little bit. It was a cruel idea, but absolutely appropriate. We went to it and I thought, Save me, save me.

INTERVIEWER

What were the practical effects of that experience? How did it affect your own writing?

PRYNNE

Gradually I became less cocksure. It made me have strong objections to the kind of thing I was doing. It didn't make it any easier. My pencil insisted on writing this stuff that I was not very impressed by, or interested in. It took a while to work my way out of it. I would read Melville, and think, Jesus, this is the way to get free, but look at the cost. It must have completely destroyed the equanimity of Melville's mind to project it into the strange alien violence of the pressures he put it under, the destinations he coerced it into. It was so different from someone like Stevens, who seemed to be calmly in control and deliberate in the writing practise. I thought, There must be some connection between these two. They are using the same language, they live in the same world. What is this? What's happening? What am I doing in this place? It was very disturbing. Being on one's own made it even more difficult to assimilate into it. I didn't have, as I said, any relations to the Harvard apparatus. I was assigned to some scholars, I had a few meetings with Douglas Bush, one or two meetings with David Perkins, but they amounted to nothing. They were not interested in me, very justly. I was certainly not interested in them, equally justly.

I eventually fell out with Cid Corman because he sent me an issue of *Origin* and one of the conditions of doing this was you should have an

exchange with him. You should closely read and be serious about what he had assembled. He sent an issue that contained some drafts of some latter-day Noh plays, and I wrote to Cid. I said, Cid, I have to be frank with you, and tell you to my great discomfort that I found this material boring. There's no point in beating about the bush, it did not arouse my interest, it seemed repetitious, and the product was a kind of formulaic translation practise. It set off no sparks for me. He said, I was afraid you might think that, and I was afraid that others might think that, but in particular I'm sorry to find that you think it, too. And I think that means, probably, we've reached the end of the road. It was a just assessment. We had reached the end of the road. There was not much more he could tell me, and there was not much more I needed to hear from him. So we just thought it better to part. It was well managed, you know. He was an intelligent man. He realised this connection had run its course. But my connection with the work of Paul Celan at this time developed in part through his prompting.

INTERVIEWER

You were in correspondence with Charles Olson?

PRYNNE

Olson and I exchanged comments about all sorts of things, including the linguistics of poetic composition. It was clear to me that he'd been a very influential and powerful teacher. It was also clear, at one point, that Olson was thinking that if I'd been on the scene ten or fifteen years earlier, he would've invited me to join him on the Black Mountain team. Having read enough and heard enough about the way things were done there, I asked myself if I would have accepted such an invitation. I was quite clear that I would not have done so. It was not an institution that I could have willingly associated myself with, partly because they were such bullies. Olson and the others practised ascendancy over the students and dominated their development, and offered themselves as exemplary models to be followed, not as choices to be made. Partly, too, because their knowledge of scholarship, and their understanding of things outside the ambience of personal interest and behaviour, was extremely casual. There were papers in the *Black Mountain Review* by Creeley that were grossly erroneous with regard to basic information. There was an absurd discussion about someone called Putnam, as I

recall. It was meant to be George Puttenham. Creeley had heard the name spoken and he propagated this absurd misidentification. I was incensed by the absurdity. Didn't they have a library? Weren't they able to check up on information? No, they weren't interested in any sort of reliable connection with the data of literary practise. I wouldn't have wanted to do that. I remember thinking, rather priggishly I may say, that it was something I wouldn't have done. For I was at a serious institute, and I'd been surrounded by serious scholars who had serious habits. And even though I used these habits in my own interest, and explored them in my own way, it was a very stabilising framework.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something about poetry and scholarly responsibility? What's the moment at which poetic license reaches the limit of its virtue?

PRYNNE

Well, that's an extremely important question. It's very difficult to know when you've reached such a boundary. Sometimes if a poet is lucky, he has friends who will take it upon themselves to point a few things out. One of the features of Pound's isolation in Rapallo was that he separated himself from clever friends who could say, Come off it, Ezra, for heaven's sake, wise up, pay attention, don't be so stupid, read a few things, let me tell you what I think as a reader of your stuff. But he isolated himself. He was surrounded by people who believed in these crackpot economic ideas. And none of them told him that he was going off the rails.

I'm afraid the same would have been true with Olson. Some intelligent friend should have said, Look, Charlie, it's all very well, but there comes a point where you're answerable for certain uses of material. Your readers and students are going to say, Are we to follow down these roads, and if so, where are they going to take us? If you don't care about these questions, then you've abandoned one of the important things that it means to be a poet. Yeats made a regular ass of himself in his adoption of spiritualist blarney, even if he was mostly just playing with it.

After all, one of the few things that was to be said for Davie and Empson was that they kept their mental equipment at work. And Olson vandalised his intellectual equipment as his career went along. He took all sorts of

archaeological material and bungled it around to make these farragoes of Nordic mythology. It was very uncomfortable to me, because not only had I read all these German texts which he couldn't read, but I'd studied as an undergraduate the Old Icelandic corpus, and I'd learned Old Icelandic as a language. I could just about read these Old Icelandic poems. Olson would go off onto a romance about them and he hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about. And I would think, Why doesn't he read this material? Well, he *can't* read this material. Why doesn't he *learn* to read this material? There are translations he could read. He could start to understand things. But by that stage it was too late for him. The Mayan stuff, for example. He had no real understanding of how glyph languages work. It was a romantic, liberational idea for him, but it took leave of historical record rather early and rather freely.

INTERVIEWER

You were also in correspondence with Edward Dorn?

PRYNNE

I got to know Dorn through this connection with the American poets of that era. We were very cordial, very close friends for a very long period of time. Fifty years or so. I still miss him very much. The connection was very vivid and very constant and indeed the archive of our correspondence runs to near fifty binders of papers. We made travels together, in England and in the U.S. We spent a good deal of time amusing each other by wickedness and absurdity and all sorts of other fantastical adventures. We talked about politics endlessly in these exchanges, as I recall.

INTERVIEWER

Practical politics? American and English politics?

PRYNNE

Yes. Global and American and English, wide-ranging arguments. Mostly skeptical and scathing. American foreign policy was a subject of constant amazement. We could scarcely believe our eyes and ears about what we heard was going on at this time.

INTERVIEWER

This was the era of the Vietnam War?

PRYNNE

Yes, oh yes.

INTERVIEWER

Was that a transformation of political opinion for you? Or a continuation?

PRYNNE

That's a very difficult question to answer accurately. I certainly, as time went on, became much more committed ideologically to what would be regarded as a left-wing, rather European-influenced point of view. I'm not quite sure when this transition occurred, because I don't think I would ever have thought of myself as inclined towards Marxist opinions when I was a student. I certainly objected to Raymond Williams's ideologies when he was my teacher. He didn't promote them very actively, but it was clear that they were an important part of his work. It was partly because he was a stodgy performer. He didn't have brilliance. He didn't have wit and sharpness of mind. Stylistically, it wasn't an attractive pursuit. But nonetheless, his opinions ought to have aroused more of an echo with me, and they didn't. It was curious because my parents were both staunch socialists.

INTERVIEWER

And now?

PRYNNE

I would probably now describe myself as a peculiar and extraneous Marxist, in some sense of that word. Keston Sutherland, who was my student and who is now exemplary and active in our friendship as poets, is a more committed and ferociously ideological Marxist than I am. We have quite frequent exchanges, because he's become deeply enmeshed in Hegelian interpretation and argument. I have tried to persuade him that just as I'm not really interested in the exemplary nature of authorship, and the influential nature of didactic or instructional presence in the lives of others, so I regard the Marxist argument as a humanistic projection of political narrative. When we have these arguments,

I explain to Keston that I'm probably more interested in Engels, in his dialectic of nature, than I am in Marx. He says, That's because you've already claimed the benefit of what you choose not now to give credence to in the Marxian tradition, which has influenced your thought to the point where you now don't need it. I say, That's one way of interpreting it, but you would say that, wouldn't you?

But, certainly, political ideas have become more influential in my thinking practise and they come into my poems quite frequently. In *Brass* (1971), there's quite a lot of overt ideological vocabulary milling about, which you wouldn't have found to that degree or of that kind in *The White Stones*, to that degree or of that kind. So there's been a movement, somehow. I can't put my finger on quite when or where or how it occurred. It may indeed have been partly in response to world events: the Vietnam affair and other serious ideological disturbances.

INTERVIEWER

And you later became interested in Mao?

PRYNNE

More so than in the thought of Marx, in fact. The narrative that Mao Zedong invented and devised to produce a native Chinese style of Marxism was and is still extremely interesting to me. That interest is written on the surface and in the crevices all over *Kazoo Dreamboats*. So it's still an active part of my thinking practise, which is curious because it's no longer part of the intellectual world of the Chinese. They've abandoned this area mostly, to my great discomfort. They've become a capitalist country with reckless commercialism, which has replaced any sort of ideological purpose that gave direction and point to their social aspirations. I would have been more comfortable in the bad period of Chinese Maoism than I am in the good period of post-Maoist China, which is full of unwholesome abandonments of serious disposition. Mao was a serious revolutionary. His revolutionary style is there to be read about, and I read about it extensively. He started off in the countryside and in Hunan Province, and built up a kind of working base with agricultural workers to make a transit between an old-style, institutional, defensive capitalism, and a new kind of world open to activity of the more constructive kind.

I've travelled all over, I lived and worked in Hunan Province for a time. I went to the Maoist birthplace as an act of pious recognition, and I read

most of Mao's works at one time or another with a good deal of attention. The 1937 essay "On Contradiction" is one of his major essays. Most Western readers find it nonsensical, and pour scorn on my interest in it—fat lot I care. It's been a serious connection for me because Mao has a complex understanding of the task of the dialectic. He believes that dialectic is a principle of relationship and activity within the material order itself, the actual order of nature, and not just within the intellectual order. It has meant a lot to me. As Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* did. I'm not an Adornoite. Quite a lot of Cambridge literary intellectuals have signed up for a kind of Adorno-type commitment. I've never quite been of that commitment, but his understanding of the dialectic process, particular to self-enfranchisement from the metaphysical German tradition, which is so overbearing and so constraining—Adorno finds very ingenious and witty ways of liberating himself from the constraints of the German tradition.

INTERVIEWER

What has Mao's career meant to you?

PRYNNE

That's a painful question. I was good friends with Joseph Needham, a fellow and master of this college. He was a great scholar in the history of Chinese thought. I'd had many talks with him and he was a very kind and intelligent and friendly and wonderful person to know. He had a very curious confusion of commitments. He was a committed Taoist, a committed Maoist, and a committed Christian, which is a pretty difficult mixture, as he himself would acknowledge. He'd say, I don't know how I manage to make these things lie down together, and whenever I think about it I find myself in a confusion, so I try not to think about it. Contradiction was something he was very familiar with. But the later career of Mao Zedong was a matter of great distress to him, and indeed it was to me. Because it all flies off the rails, most conspicuously with the Cultural Revolution. But there's a period before this, too, when the agricultural policies are imposed on commune-type farming practise, which have disastrous, terrible, destructive consequences. We in the West didn't understand that for a very long time. Information was very slow to come through.

INTERVIEWER

Let's turn back to England, and to Davie—did you introduce him to Dorn's work?

PRYNNE

Yes, definitely. Davie read Dorn with admiration, and eventually decided to offer him a visiting post at the new University of Essex, where Davie had become pro-vice-chancellor or something. So Dorn comes over, he comes back to Essex and is installed there, just in time for the massive student unrest and uprising of that era. So the campus becomes a hotbed of fervent wildness, and there is Dorn in the middle of it, with Davie as his mentor and supporter on one side, and all this wildness on the other side. And Dorn was not interested in defending institutions or their values, or in paying any attention to their stability. If there were active energy and excitement, he would be there instantly. So he and Davie had fantastic rows. Davie said, You're an institutional wrecker, I regret bitterly that I invited you here. You're attempting to collaborate in the destruction of an institute to which I've given my heart and soul. You have no right to behave in this fashion. It was a really awful falling out. And it was absolutely characteristic of Dorn. He just thought excitement was important. He had no loyalty to institutions. Why should he have? They'd never done anything for him. They'd never offered him any permanency or steadiness or support.

INTERVIEWER

That would have been around 1968? What was happening in your poems?

PRYNNE

Well, *Force of Circumstance* didn't have any sales, it had almost no reviews. So this was the end of the line for that. I can't quite remember the chronology of the next steps, but very soon after that, *The English Intelligencer* had started up. It was initiated by Andrew Crozier, who'd been a student of mine and who spent some time in America and studied with Olson. That was, almost certainly, a step that got me out of this silly *Force of Circumstance* nonsense. I disconnected myself from it by taking the Don Allen route and working it seriously, pondering what it meant and experimenting with it. One of the other escape routes for me was my continued correspondence with Dorn.

We didn't talk about poetry much, but we were very energetic and it was an adventurous correspondence. It was a great escape route to talk to someone who came from an entirely different background, who had an entirely different sense of the world and language and the possibilities of language. It was very liberating.

INTERVIEWER

Tell us more about *The English Intelligencer*.

PRYNNE

I have learned quite a bit from reading this book by Alex Latter, *Late Modernism and "The English Intelligencer"*. It's true that Andrew Crozier's idea was, to put it in rather crudely synoptic form, that the big American explosion of postwar writing opened up all sorts of new energy and possibility for writing. But it was very deeply connected to the indigenous American practise. Melville and Hawthorne, Whitman, Pound and Williams, the great precursors in America. Crozier's idea was that we had to find an innovative option to activate this new energy without simply parroting the American work, a way to do it in an English fashion that would connect with something in the English background without being parasitical or ridiculously imitative. He wanted to find a way to develop this active interchange of energy of new composition and of new ideas that was not hemmed in by traditional publications of the old-fashioned heavyweight commercial kind.

That's the way this thing was born. It was always a mimeographed set of sheets. I did most of the mimeographing because I got access to a machine while I was in college, and I managed to snap up a lot of free paper. We did all the things, more or less in the backwoods of the institution. Andrew used to type up the duplicating skins. Sometimes Peter Riley did some of them. I'd do a bit of typing, but I also ran off the machine. It was very energetic. It opened out and mobilised a lot of new energy from a lot of different people, many of them in and around Cambridge, or connected with here. But it was not sectarian in that sense. There were all sorts of far-flung people involved—MacSweeney from Newcastle, several people from Bristol, all over Britain, in fact. It was a short run, two or three years, but it focused and fostered a lot of energy, and created a step out of the moribund, defensive, traditional straitjacket of English poetic writing at that time.

INTERVIEWER

Many of your poems for the *Intelligencer* would appear in *The White Stones*—a book that is unusually long, and changes a lot as it goes on. Your later books seem, by contrast, to be discrete events.

PRYNNE

That's true. *Brass* was a distinct break with its precursor practise, and the books that followed it likewise involved quite drastic transitions. I watched Eliot's career—I make it sound conscious though I'm probably inventing this particular distinctness of attention—but I watched Eliot's career, and after he'd done *The Waste Land*, with Pound's brilliant redaction, he goes on to write *Ash-Wednesday*. It's a work that is very Eliotic, full of Eliot's mixture of sarcasm and reverence. I found it very uncomfortable because I thought that mixture was very familiar. Essentially, it's a *mélange* of elements that were already a part of his practise, and not going anywhere. They were going to retard his ability to continue to be a serious experimental poet, because every time you repeat yourself you disable an opportunity to be original in the work that follows. Eliot became, I think, very seriously impeded by his sense of the tradition that he created for himself. *Four Quartets* so much admires its own origination.

INTERVIEWER

Do you always need a clean break?

PRYNNE

I remember writing *Down where changed* (1979). It was not committed to being attractive. I won't say it was an ugly book, deliberately, in the way that some of the English painters of the early twentieth century painted in ugly fashion deliberately. They had an ideological commitment to not being pretty. But it was a harsh book.

Dorn used to say, Don't finish a book until you've written at least five pages of its successor collection. Otherwise you'll get stranded between books, and that's a very painful position to be in. I never wanted to take that view. It would mean you'd be partially repeating yourself all the time. You'd never make a clean break, never start anything significantly new for yourself. When *Down where changed* approached its conclusion, I thought,

Shall I shut the door on this book? I knew it was going to be a dangerous thing to do. And then I thought, Damn it, I will. I just will. I'm not going to just keep a little thread going so that I've got a nice little corner I can revert to. I'll get rid of it, I'll terminate it, if necessary by violent means. And it was a costly enterprise to do that. There was a quite considerable hiatus between the conclusion of that book and my ability to get going on something else. But I'm glad I did it then. Many of my collections have been the consequence of a terminal relation with their predecessors.

There were a few small collections more recently—*Unanswering Rational Shore* (2001) and books of that period—which do have a certain kind of attention to the same sources of energy. They are, on the whole, rather negative and painful books, rather sarcastic about the abuses of the language process. Looking back on them now, I could easily have limited myself to one of those collections. I didn't have to do four, or three, or even two. That's the only point I can think of in my composing work where I haven't been able to start afresh.

INTERVIEWER

What's the fear in repeating yourself?

PRYNNE

There's an element of fear, and it's difficult to describe quite what the motivation of it is. Writers had better not be too cocksure that they've got inspiration on their side. I have seen enough writers get stuck by not being vigilant enough about the tendency of their own work to repeat itself. You can call it fear, but you can also call it a kind of vigilance that motivates a writer to keep his wits about him—or her. As the circumstances around you change and develop, if you don't change and develop, you get stuck. You get left behind with yourself. You find that you're in the company of somebody who's not any longer very interesting. You maintain a kind of dummy interest by simply performing similar antics. Occasionally I would write poems like this, and I'd think, My God, I don't have to do this. I always found it difficult to destroy poems, so it was a matter of some defence with me—perhaps fear is not a wrong word—to write a poem which I couldn't love and couldn't want, but didn't have the energy to destroy.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write many poems you found you could not love?

PRYNNE

Certainly in the early stages I had to write the unloved poems. I couldn't exorcise them unless I gave them the houseroom of a performance. Did it, went through with it, saw what came out, saw that it was not what I wanted to do, or that I wanted to be the person who had done it. It was an important part of my quite conscious practise to write work from which I would eagerly detach myself. I did not want to continue to be the author of work I had previously written.

I actually didn't much want to be a poet, frankly, because I regarded this as an extremely self-gratifying motivation, and not one that held any charms for me. Every time some grand poet shot his mouth off—or hers—about some issue of the day, they talked such nonsense with such grave and ridiculous confidence that it struck me as a terrible career option, to be consulted as a poet about matters of moment. I never found that an interesting idea for one minute.

When I'd written a work, it wasn't going to be a convincingly accomplished, independent composition until I'd gotten my fingers out of it. It had to be done with. That's why publishing was a great relief to me. It got it out of the circulatory system. That's why I was never keen on going into anthologies, because that makes for a little museum display of pieces you've done once, or twice, and people think, Oh yes. Nor much keen on republication. When New York Review Books comes along with their offer—to reissue *The White Stones*—I think it slightly comical, really rather absurd at this stage to publish that work. As if somehow it'll stand on its own.

INTERVIEWER

Does it stand on its own?

PRYNNE

I think it is characteristic of a certain moment in the history of its time. I was a lot younger and involved in working out a marriage prospect for my own development as a family person, which was fraught with emotional risks and complexities. I was not very good at the emotional life of personal

relations. I was clumsy, and inexperienced, and fumbling much of the time. A typical piece of ridiculous, gawky intellectualism. You suppose that being in love would be a joyous and exciting and liberating experience. I found it exceptionally demanding. I couldn't make it work well. I couldn't make my situations seem to work in a way that would do credit to both of us. It seemed difficult to act genuinely and with true emotion without being ridiculous and facile. The dangers of a sort of self-imitation seemed paramount, and it was very difficult to judge what would be authentic expressions of true feeling in that era. So many of these poems are stranded in that difficult hinterland of emotions that don't have a comfortable, relaxed, natural home.

When I was correcting the proofs of this New York Review version, there were all sorts of embarrassing moments when I thought, Oh I can't do this, what was I thinking of? Why should I write like this? There's a certain sort of bogus spiritism in the work that embarrasses me. I think, What did I do that for? Why couldn't I purge it out? There's a rather facile emotionalism that was indulged in the book, too. You can forgive it as a young man with enthusiasm. But I look at it and I think, Was it necessary to do that? Yes, it was necessary to do that. That's precisely the answer to the question. It was necessary. I couldn't have done what followed unless I'd gone through that.

There aren't all that many poems that I've produced which I'm unquestionably glad to have written. Not many. In many cases, I have reserve—sometimes quite serious reserve. It's quite often the case that those reserves enabled me to go on and do the next thing. They've been a source of energy to start fresh and say, Don't do that again. Think about this, and work out some route.

INTERVIEWER

Frank O'Hara often said that he would much rather get on to the next poem than linger over the last. He has been an important poet for you since you first encountered him in Allen's anthology.

PRYNNE

O'Hara loved fun, and he was exceptionally, ironically, estranged from the idea of simple and unquestionable enjoyment. Enjoyment was a kind of task for Frank. He was an extremely moral poet. Very burdened with a sense of obligation and of self-question with regard to the liveliness of life. He was

very jocular, and jostled with the possibilities of making fun, and making fun of, being full of satirical wit. And underneath this satirical wit, there was a constant, barely perceptible nibble of melancholia, in the sense that the pursuit of fun was a fragile affair. It kept breaking down, your friends kept falling by the wayside. Your sense of the buoyancy of life was constantly at risk. And this risk was something he was tasked to endure. It was the task of the poet to recognise that this risk was real, and he was prepared to throw the possibility of happiness, and fun, into the risk-play of being a poet. "To Hell with It," for example, one of O'Hara's wonderful ode poems, is witty, buoyant, flamboyant, but at the same time, gloomily melancholic. Why should O'Hara, confronted with grief, or sorrow, feel that as a poet he has some duty to write an elegy? No, he had a duty to be happy. A duty to himself, to maintain the buoyancy of poetical happiness. But this sense of inward consistency was always at risk. And he accepted this risk. I think he pursued it. That's why he was so much better than most of the poets around him, who juggled with playfulness of increasingly imitative kinds.

If you expand your range beyond the experience of friends and family and the joys of nature, happiness is a very fragile idea. Because the world is so full of misery—so full of disaster and destruction, and violence, and vituperative vindictiveness, of political exploitation, of financial insecurity, of the breakdown of trust, and the whole international crisis world of terror and struggles for justice, that it's not easy to see how a poet can claim any right to be happy, while all this is going on. To be a poet, and to be there in the thick of an important and powerful language, is to be in direct potential communication with every part of the world's action, including, without doubt, all its misery.

It's difficult not to be overwhelmed by the sense that language joins you up to the powers of lamentation. At the same time, that's where the dialectical aspect frequently has its task to perform. Contradiction and oppositional thinking, ironical thinking, has to find a way to juggle up these terms, so that the mood quality, and the emotional, and moral tonalities involved, maintain their power without becoming oppressively single-minded. Single-mindedness is no good to a poet.

INTERVIEWER

What did O'Hara do for your work?

PRYNNE

He was a great fountainhead of energy. He was a great originator of metrical and prosodic experiment. His poems had terrific brio, and they moved about the page and galvanised the page space. Sometimes he would nearly stop, and then not stop. He was extremely skilled at playing this notion of his own continuity in writing a piece. He wasn't really writing projective verse in an Olsonian manner, because the Olson manner has a personality projection. Although O'Hara allows a kind of poetic personality to be at stake on the page, it's a kind of rhetorical projection. We know it's a plaything, and he's toying it around with great skill and some degree of abandonment. It doesn't matter to him if it gets damaged, because he's got others up his sleeve. "In Memory of My Feelings" has got a whole series of alternative personalities, and when one gets damaged, or lost on the way, he'll mobilise another. It's exceptionally virtuosic.

INTERVIEWER

Let's fast-forward to a recent book, one that has come up already—*Kazoo Dreamboats*.

PRYNNE

Kazoo was an unprecedented and unexpected kind of composition. I was very conscious that it was well out of line from anything I've tried to do before. It was full of an extremely complex system of self-contradictions which ought to produce serious disorder in the thought process, and I simply said to myself, more or less consciously, I'm going to let it do that. I contradicted some of my deeply held beliefs and opinions. I deliberately as if by a kind of necessitous instinct wrote myself into overt opposition to them. When it was all done, and I came to read this work, as if produced from an alien planet, I would ask myself, Do I hold these views? Do I believe these opinions? Do they replace and permanently cancel the points of view which preceded them? Is the damage mortal and deliberate, and am I going to stand by the damage? Or is it just a phase I went through, just some wild extravagance, and do I then revert to being the kind of person that I was before? If so, with what alteration? These are very uncomfortable questions. And I have lived with them because I really was, and am, unable to answer them. In that sense it's the most disordering work I've ever composed, and it

has left me in a great confusion of mind. Sometimes I'm quite satisfied with the confusion and sometimes I'm deeply mortified by it. It ought not to be in quite such a state of perpetual jeopardy. The process of composing it was very peculiar and discrepant.

INTERVIEWER

Tell us about the process of writing the poem.

PRYNNE

In the spring of 2011, I had one of these feelings that I sometimes have, that maybe I'm about to write something. Maybe something's coming along. I had no idea what it might be, I just thought, Well, something is in the works. And the more I thought about it, the more I had no idea what it might be. I wasn't sure I needed to know. Maybe I needed to clear a space to decide what it was going to be, without making any preemptive allocations. And so I resolved this in a way that I'd never done before: I decided to compose in a completely alien environment. What this meant was that I needed to leave my comfortable home and all my usual appurtenances—books and papers and reference material and all the rest of it. It would mean going to a foreign country. It would mean going to a country in which the spoken language was not English, where I didn't know a single word of the spoken language of this new environment. It'd have to be reasonably economical to get there, and reasonably economical to spend some time there. It might have been Finland; but I chose to go to Thailand, because I'd been to Thailand once before.

I arranged and clocked into an hotel, a very modest, cheap hotel in Bangkok, with the sole purpose of writing whatever this composition was going to be. And right up to the last minute I had no idea whether it would be anything at all. I took with me a mountain of paper and pencils, my laptop—in order to verify certain sorts of material I might want to lean on—and one book. The book choice surprised me and it would totally surprise you, because it was a very recently published textbook concerning a particular species of weak molecular forces known as van der Waals forces. When I saw that this book, V. Adrian Parsegian's *Van der Waals Forces: A Handbook for Biologists, Chemists, Engineers, and Physicists*, had been published by the Cambridge University Press, I just knew it was going to be an important book to me. I couldn't tell you why, but I'd already encountered

this phenomenon of molecular forces and I knew I was going to care about it, partly because it was going to support a certain instinct I had about the structure of material things, which was increasingly an important question to me. I'd become a kind of materialist in some abstract sense of the word, more progressively as my thought practises have developed.

This hotel, by the way, had an all-night restaurant, which meant that at four o'clock in the morning, I could go down and have ice cream and coffee and refresh my spirits and return to my writing desk and write another slab of stuff. I wrote feverishly, uninterrupted throughout the whole three-week period. Something I'd never done in my life before. For example, I never gave it a title. I had no idea what its subject matter was going to be. I had no idea about its range of material. I had no idea about its prosodic formalism. I had no idea how long it was going to be, if it was going to be terminable or interminable. I would engage in writing sessions that lasted, say, four or five hours, and then I'd be exhausted and I'd break off. Sometimes I'd sleep. Sometimes, if it was daytime, I'd have a little walk in the outside air to clear my thoughts. Then I'd go down to the restaurant and help myself to coffee and ice cream, which was my staple nutritional support. Then I'd go back upstairs again. And my rule, when I'd go back upstairs, was never to read any more than the previous ten lines. By the time I got to page twenty-plus, I had no idea what the rest of it was about, because I'd never once turned the pages back to see what the earlier writing had been doing. I was very, very focused. I was in a state of almost constant exhilaration. It seemed like a terrific moment of liberty to be able to write directly onto the paper what seemed to be the next thing to be written down. Some of the things I wrote down astonished me. I'd think, Did I write that? Don't ask! Did I mean that? Don't ask! What does it mean for what's going to come next? Don't ask! I switched off all the question-forming practise. It was not automatic pilot. I was fully in possession of my senses. It's true that quite a lot of text and thoughts came forward and offered themselves to be written down. But it was not the Kerouac-type, random, automatic writing. It was indeed the reverse of that: very deliberate and fully self-aware. At the same time, it surprised me a lot. I wrote down opinions I couldn't believe I held. I violated opinions I had held previously for a long time. I simply trampled them down. Why did I do that? Was it deliberate, reckless violence? No, there was some kind of principle involved, but I couldn't for the life of me say what the principle was.

INTERVIEWER

How did it violate your opinions, and which opinions did it violate?

PRYNNE

Well, in the era of *The White Stones* there is a certain implicit metaphysical idealism and quasi-religious vocabulary, with which in retrospect I have not been altogether comfortable. The tendency is recognisably English; it's difficult to avoid vocabulary of that kind. The *Kazoo Dreamboats* venture pushed me into this other territory quite strongly, and opened some areas of contradiction that were unavoidable. I'd already been seriously thinking about dialectics as a method of confronting certain kinds of opposition or contradictory structures of thought.

The one major thing was this extremely unexpected and forceful presence of Langland and the *Piers Plowman* enterprise. He just appeared. I took that very seriously. Partly because the structural contradictions in Langland's thought were so central to the whole idea of his being a poet and doing the tasks of poetry. The Franciscan idea of a sacred poverty was so important to him and was so visibly violated by everything in the social world around him. He cares deeply, and is worried stiff by what kind of answers he can find to the questions of human conduct, the questions of equitable justice, the questions of honorable satisfaction of one's sacred religious duties. The line movement and the whole structure of these rather long lines that Langland writes are movements of profound worry. He suffered this poem, and didn't avoid what writing it seems to have thrust upon him.

At the same time, there were other thematic elements that came into this poem of mine, unexpectedly and without preparation, one of which was Parmenides. When Parmenides swam into view, it was partly because of the way in which this great poem of his, this philosophical treatise, is presented as a strange voyage in which the speaker mounts a chariot into the heavens and makes a celestial course across the sky. I was able, because I had this laptop with me with fortunately all the right connections, to access a whole translation of Parmenides and to reread it pretty thoroughly right there on the screen. To my surprise, I more or less identified what I thought was the main thrust: the Parmenidean argument about being, and the vocabulary used to describe the questions of being and non-being. I found myself in quite rigorous disagreement with that argument. Well, I had never thought

about Parmenides as an author you could disagree with. But I wrote it straight into the poem.

The study of these roundabout sources left me with something about the molecular structure of matter, which of course was a theme of great interest to the pre-Socratics. They were struggling to understand the nature of the material world. The molecular view of the structure of matter seemed to me—I don't suppose I would have thought of it like this, but this is one simplified way of putting it—an antidote to a certain kind of spiritism. It provides an argument against a whole slab of metaphysics in the German tradition, a whole slab of metaphysical idealism in the English Romantic tradition. I found myself resentful about this idealism, partly because it philosophically and theoretically no longer seemed to command my loyalties, and partly because it was a very expensive dodge that provokes a great deal of trouble in thinking clearly about the world situation. These comfortable middle-class values assume loyalty to an accepted class structure which by clear implication denies shared social justice to large segments of the planetary population.

I've always held this view that poets had better be clear about where their allegiances lie, because otherwise they're going to go sailing off into an empyrean, which is a luxury they should never afford themselves. I was rather on my guard about this, and that meant that, well, in particular one of my targets was Wordsworth. There are remarks in this poem which are directly anti-Wordsworthian digs about the elevation of spirit that Wordsworth so cogently and eloquently propounds. I have believed that kind of worldview, despite the burden of explicit complication that it contains. Implicitly, for all my working life, Wordsworth has been a kind of icon in my way of thinking about the world, for so many different reasons. So, to find Wordsworth becoming a figure of opposition in my writing practise was of great surprise to me.

INTERVIEWER

We would like to ask you about a particular passage. Just a few lines:

For sure not in good likeness, profile in slant along the catchment
proposed, the speech corridor. The sentence in word build is additive
but logic partitions the stream, sense outriders thicken its pur-
pose impossible for anything not to be or not if by its own option

of necessity, thus it is impossible for anything to not be. That state of not being anything is reserved for nothing, heavily in occupation. But and to not be is the being also variant of possible utter inbuilt outcry or by speech device against not must (by self-necessity) be not where it is but what it does, to do as against not to cause to be done: on the right boys, on the left girls, decreed for the children of fate graded in charity.

PRYNNE

Well, I wouldn't like to be confronted with a passage like that, now that we've propounded it. I'd walk out, I think. I remember when I used to have to set for an exam a select passage for discussion, citing a passage from Beckett, a heavily ironical passage. In those days one had to go to the exam room in case there were questions about the paper. There must have been about 150 kids all crouched over their desks, perusing this passage, and one of them laughed outright! And I thought, Wow. That is exactly correct! A really choice moment, this was. A very solemn moment and he laughed like a dragon. It was very reassuring.

So we've got this passage: "on the right boys, on the left girls." It's partly in reference to the strange gender distinctions in Parmenides, but it's also a reference to William Blake. In *Songs of Innocence*, in one of the chimney-sweep poems, in his illustration, the charity kids are being paraded. The chimney-sweep boys are being mobilised because they can be sent up chimneys and made to serve a useful purpose; no one will care that this will corrode their lungs and eventually kill them. The beadles who are conducting this charity procession up to St. Paul's, where the Thanksgiving will be sung, have arranged it so that the boys are on the right and the girls are on the left so there shall be no hanky-panky.

But otherwise, this is a heavily complex set of manoeuvres with vocabulary. I wouldn't like to have to try a rational explanation of it. The corridor idea has been in this poem from the very opening sentence, a kind of access route within the structure of an habitation or an edifice. But also a speech corridor is the way a sentence constructs its sequacious development through its syntax to become an oppositional part of discourse. At the same time, corridors are frequently features of custodial institutions. They restrict and marshal the possibility of movement in certain ways. The corridor occurs

right at the conclusion of the poem, too. It's an idea that's been floating about. It's not been in any sense defined. But it's floating as an idea.

The play with words like *something* and *nothing* and *anything* is part of the way in which these representative abstract pronouns are constructed in discourse; very cogently reviewed in Richard Gale, *Negation and Non-Being*. Most European languages have structures of this kind. Most Oriental languages don't have structures of this kind. I'm not quite sure if there's a Chinese word for *nothing*—probably, there is. But I'm sure there isn't a word for *anything*. And, indeed, it's not possible rigorously to ask what the relation between *nothing* and *anything* would be. They're just pronoun devices to handle certain options which are going to make reference to one thing rather than to another thing. This is a metaphysically playful series of conjurations with these words and the suggestions that they make.

INTERVIEWER

The poem seems to remember so much—science, literary history, philosophy.

PRYNNE

Well, one inhabits a hall of mirrors, a whole series of echoes from reading, from experience, from life practise and the rest. This becomes richer and denser as time goes on. It's also complicated by forgetfulness, things that you only in part remember. In the case of *Dreamboats*, one of my strategic reasons for adopting this isolation-chamber aspect was precisely to disable the immediate presence of prompts to memory, so as to activate the more remote contents of the memory chamber, because they wouldn't be impeded by visual cues. My empty crow's nest, this bland and blank bedroom in the middle of Bangkok, was not going to serve up any distractions. It was an echo chamber.

I remembered, because I had been involved in this poem a lot, that double sestina of Sidney's, "Ye Goatherd Gods." I quote from that in this *Kazoo* poem, from memory. I may have called it up on the laptop in order not to misquote it. But my use of the laptop, aside from getting things like Parmenides and Langland up on the screen in front of me, was to call up moments that I was tempted to write into this poem, in order not to misquote them from memory. If I had misquoted them, it might easily be later corrected, but the misquoted phrase might start to do some damage and make some connections, and then I'd be stuck with it.

INTERVIEWER

Where does the title come from?

PRYNNE

I didn't want *Kazoo Dreamboats* to be an autobiographical work, I didn't want it to be a theoretical treatise. I wanted it to be an extravaganza, really. When I had nearly completed this work, I thought, What title is it going to have? It's rather critical, because readers will take a cue from the title as to what kind of work it is, and what kind of reading sense they should adopt. The title had to be provocatively unexpected and at variance with what would be a normal treatise or composition—playful, jocular, fatuous, all those things would suit me very nicely.

I hit on this exotic title, and its hyper-ambitious subtitle, *or, On What Is*, and I thought, That's just right. Because it gives the reader an advanced warning not to be prepared for anything, not to expect any reckonable framework for the tasks of reading this work. They've got to be sort of fancy-free. Not quite fancy-free, because it's a serious work, but where the seriousness is, and how that seriousness is reckoned with, is their task more than it is mine.

INTERVIEWER

Would you tell us about your teaching and influence at Cambridge—and the idea of the Cambridge School of poetry?

PRYNNE

Here we touch on a highly contentious subject. It has been held, by various different areas of opinion, that there was, and perhaps is, a Cambridge School. This is a pretty dire description, and one that I find extremely uncomfortable. But there's no doubt that if you compare Cambridge with Oxford, there has been a great deal of innovative and experimental, lively writing done in Cambridge, and around, of which there was no parallel at Oxford. Oxford was moribund with regard to seriously inventive and active poetical writing. But the Cambridge world promoted a lot of very lively work, and very lively people doing it.

It was not, by any means, so far as the *Intelligencer* was concerned, limited to Cambridge, because that community, which operated through the postal service, stretched out to Bristol, and Birmingham, and Newcastle, and

Edinburgh, all over the place. On the other hand, when people say that some of this work shows, from time to time, a certain kind of stylistic commonality, it's hard to deny that this is the case. On the whole, it's rather intellectualised. It's frequently ironically dramatised, or dramatically ironised. And these features have a certain range of prevalence in the Cambridge environment. And some of that has to be due, obliquely, to me. I make this confession with extreme reluctance, and great unwillingness, because I find the idea that I have offered any kind of arbitrations of experiments in style, or whatever, personally in my own behalf, exceptionally awkward, and unnecessary, and anxiety provoking. Black Mountain would be a warning against this, or the New York School!

INTERVIEWER

Are there other elements of your work that were influential?

PRYNNE

My prosodic dispersal of the text around the page space became a feature that could be copied or modified, and several young writers started to write blocks of text on the page; they would never have done that if it hadn't been for the work that I'd written and published in that mode, often in adapted response to modernist American practise. But very seldom did anyone who had read this work of mine master this inwardly enough to find a way of being usefully like it. External features they could sometimes decorate their work with, but what was going inside of work of mine was too mysterious for most of them, fortunately. Much though they might quite have liked to do so, and have attempted to, it was work that didn't admit them easily to its inner features. And that was a great relief, because they couldn't, you know. They were kept at their distance and they went their own ways.

INTERVIEWER

Is that an accidental feature of the work, to discourage imitation, or is it a motivating impulse?

PRYNNE

Well, now, that's a very challenging question. I don't know the answer to that. I mean, there might be a somewhat defensive, or protective implication to

arranging this work in such a way that it can't easily be imitated, and possibly can't all that easily be read and interpreted. It might be that I didn't want readers to be inward with this work, in that way. I wanted them to find for themselves features in this work that they could take into their world, which would affect their world, but leave their connection with my work intact, and not personalised. This was partly to do with my notion about not writing directedly for readers, and not having any particular concernment with the problems for readers, and the fate of reading in connection with my work. I think the reasons why this work is partly sealed off against traffic with the world outside is that these poems don't have all that much of me in them. Some of *The White Stones* does, but increasingly I managed to deflect the input of personal preoccupation into these poems. It's true that there is an interior to these poems, and the interior is sometimes interchangeably positioned with the exterior, so that there's not a clear arbitrated priority between those aspects. And these two aspects contest with each other, and interact with each other, and create features of dialect as a result of this kind of activity. And, so there am I, with my pencil in my hand, as a kind of arbiter, a mediator, these thoughts come into my head, and I write them down. Mostly not because they're coming from a central part of my conviction about the world, but because they're in the process which produces them. And in that sense, this brings me round to the point that the kind of writing activity that I've done over time is the product of my relations with the language, and the possibilities of this language, and the extreme complexity of the relation of thought to language, and of the inwardness of thought to the public nature of language, and the activities that the language process can dramatically enact.

INTERVIEWER

The poems in your 2009 collection, *Streak~~~Willing~~~Entourage / 'Artesian'*, seem to be especially committed to poetic impersonality.

PRYNNE

They are not so much impersonal as depersonalised. I think they're evacuated of personal connection. You might say that the personal quality of *Down where changed* is also severely inhibited, but again the constriction is fraught with emotional cost and a certain sort of violence of denial. That's where the

dialectical part of it comes in. It's a poem that is calm, and steady, and slow, and choosy in its vocabulary, and ruthless in its outcome. I set down a little note about it in a letter which has got into circulation, in which I said something about how necessary it is that this poem should be ruthless. And that is a kind of way of marking out a personal involvement. Ruthlessness doesn't come out of thin air, it comes because someone has paid a cost to pay off a certain alternative way of being too close to a work, or too committed to the uses that might be made of it, the outcomes it might profess.

INTERVIEWER

Why did *Streak* and *Down where changed* have to be ruthless?

PRYNNE

Well, the difficulty of that question is "have to be." That these poems are ruthless, in some sense of that word, is probably true. If they are so by necessity, then you ask, What is the origin of the necessity. That's a much more difficult question, because the ruthlessness of the performance could be a stylistic option. It could just be that the mood of the moment required a certain estrangement from humane concern. And that means that some detachment, some distance, had got to be imposed, that would enable the humanitarian values to be put into suspense, or deactivated. And it's true that some parts of the vocabulary have been disabled, in order to diminish the amount of recognisable emotional commitment that runs along with the sentence structure. In *Down where changed*, the ruthlessness is unmistakably deliberate, and purposed, and cumulative, and principled. It is conducting a continuing argument with the alternative, which is sentimental permission to allow human weakness and human avoidance to be understood as the inevitable consequence of being human. At that time, I thought this permission was evasive. Not only did I want not to do that, but I think I probably wanted to punish it. I think there was a punitive element to the construction of that sequence. Self-punitive, you know: I was as much to blame for whatever the weaknesses of the emotional order might have been. It was by no means self-righteous, or sanctimonious. Actually, it's easy to say that. I think some readers might have felt that it *was* sanctimonious, and there was a sort of self-righteous preening, to think that you could create aggressively blaming sentences and discourses that would exempt the person who wrote

them from the blame levelled elsewhere. But it doesn't feel that way to me. It feels as if the authorial position is not reserved from any of the moral damage. The responsibility has to be carried equally across the whole domain of human expression and human action.

In that sense, it's ruthless because it is without pity. That is *ruth*, isn't it: pitying something. And the argument of course is that the quality of pity is an important part of the gentleness of human recognition of fellow humanity, against pride—of which most poets have a plentiful supply. Several of my poem-sequences have conducted this part argument against clemency. The argument is that mercy is a serious disruption of the moral order. Mercy abates the use of law to regulate consistently in accordance with judgment about what is right and true and necessary. With godlike condescension, mercy destroys the consistency of the human order and human law. And we live within the human ambit, and therefore we need consistency—what Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* calls "constancy." We need to defend and promote it, and that means or should mean that mercy is an extravagant extra. It also means that ruthlessness, for all that it sounds inhumane and violent and destructive, is a consequence that is hard to avoid.

And I don't like this argument very much. I'm not sure I could conduct this campaign against mercy to the bitter end, though I'm prepared to conduct it for a long way. At the final end, I'm going to dodge it by some means, because I'm human, and that's the weak but necessary ending to the strong argument that prevails, almost ultimately, at the final point.