A Manner of Utterance

Also by Ian Brinton:

Dickens's "Great Expectations" (Reader's Guides)
(London: Continuum, 2007)

Contemporary Poetry: Poets and Poetry since 1990
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The Poetry of J.H. Prynne

edited by

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Contents

Introduction

Ian Brinton

How the poets were the first philosophers, the first astronomers and historiographers and orators and musicians of the world

> Utterance also and language is given by nature to man for persuasion of others and aid of themselves—I mean the first ability to speak. For speech itself is artificial and made by man, and the more pleasing it is the more it prevaileth to such purpose as it is intended for; but speech by metre is a kind of utterance more cleanly couched and more delicate to the ear than prose is, because it is more current and slipper upon the tongue, and withal tuneable and melodious, as a kind of music, and therefore may be termed a musical speech or utterance, which cannot but please the hearer very well. Another cause is for that it is briefer and more compendious, and easier to bear away and be retained in memory, than that which is contained in multitude of words, and full of tedious ambage and long periods. It is, beside, a manner of utterance more eloquent and rhetorical than the ordinary prose which we use in our daily talk, because it is decked and set out with all manner of fresh colours and figures, which maketh that it sooner inveigleth the judgement of man, and carrieth his opinion this way and that, whither soever the heart, by impression of the ear, shall be most affectionately bent and directed.
>
> George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, 1589.

This collection of essays by musicians, visual artists, academics and teachers revolves around the notion of what is involved in the activity of reading and, in particular, what effect the reading of the poetry of J.H. Prynne has had upon them. It is not a Reader's Guide; it does not provide answers. Instead it offers personal and deeply felt reactions to reading Prynne's poetry and discovering what Douglas Templeton refers to when he says that for him the poems "put ambiguity in the foreground" where they "achieve an authenticity by acknowledging the dangerous spaces in language."

The book's genesis lay partly in my trying to reconcile within myself the views of two readers whose attitudes towards Prynne's poetry seemed so widely divergent, ranging from the quietly serious to the ludicrous. Randall Stevenson's suggestion in volume 12 of *The*

Oxford English Literary History that Prynne's "full significance for the period's poetry began to be realised only at the end of the century" seemed wildly at odds with Don Paterson's comment in an article published in November 2004 in *The Guardian* ('Rhyme and reason'). In the latter it is suggested that readers find whatever they want in their reading: "The Norwich phone book or a set of log tables would serve them as well as their Prynne, in whom they seem able to detect as many shades of mind-blowing confusion as Buddhists do the absolute." The former appears in an academic book which goes some way in charting the literary developments taking place in England between 1960 and 2000, the latter in a daily newspaper; what they share in common is that both say something about the art of reading.

The sense of relationship between the poet and the reader has been intriguingly highlighted in the recently published book by Dr. Li Zhi-min, *New Chinese Poetry under the Influence of Western Poetics: The Origins, Development and Sense of Nativeness*:

> In the face of difficult poetry, there certainly should be a change of attitude towards 'understanding' itself, so that one can feel confident to understand an 'obscure' poem in an 'obscure' way.

In terms of reading being a lifelong occupation, Li Zhi-min also brings to our attention an attitude of traditional Chinese reading:

> Traditionally, Chinese readers often read a good poem again and again, in a loud voice and by murmuring, in imagination and in meditation; in doing so they naturally enjoy the poetical beauties. And sometimes in China one may often memorise a poem one does not understand; only dozens of months or even dozens of years later to experience a sudden enlightenment and full enjoyment of the poem. Poetry is written to be read, not to be analysed.

Prynne himself has said quite a bit about reading, from the generous review of Chris Torrance's 1968 book of poems, *Green Orange Purple*

Red (*Grosseteste Review* Autumn 1969) to the more recent 'Tips on Practical Criticism for Students of English' and its companion piece, 'Tips on Reading', January 2004. In the former he praises Torrance's "singing voice of such persuasive and dilated movement" which "has not for a long time been heard in the land", words which might well be attributed to his own singing grace. In reference to 'Practical Criticism', a term to describe a Cambridge invention introduced by I.A. Richards in the 1920s, he suggests that "Regular exercises in close reading both sharpen and deepen accurate response to local texture and also feed into enhanced perception of larger-scale structure, to make us all-round better readers."

Those comments made by Li Zhi-min about traditional Chinese reading suggest a significant amount of trust and willing engagement on the part of the reader and if this were to prompt the question as to what one might read in this trusting way then perhaps we should also note Douglas Templeton's reaction to his reading of Prynne:

> There is something about the voice of these poems which led me to trust the author.

Also referring to that engagement between text and reader, reviewing *Unanswering Rational Shore* (*Poetry Review* Vol. 92, No. 2, Summer 2002) Jeremy Noel-Tod suggested that Prynne's poetry "will be misunderstood if it is looked at, and not read" and this echoes Veronica Forrest-Thomson's recognition that Prynne's poetry sought to "make language real again for the poet and the reader" (*Poetic Artifice*, Manchester University Press, 1978).

In that *Grosseteste* review of nearly forty years ago, Prynne referred to Torrance's singing voice as being "covert, aware of distance held off by a species of pearly haze, small faces of the actual suddenly but without surprise revealing an intimate curve." In an echoing image which appears in *The First Students' English Magazine* printed at Guangzhou University in May 2005, suggesting a fine sense of continuity which is certainly not to be confused with repetition, he recognised the 'brilliant' quality of the new magazine which had arisen from the reading involved in the Guangzhou University English Writing Classes "full of pearl-bright moments and shining articles all moving along in the currents of these changing times."

Perhaps the last word here ought to be given to Jeremy Prynne as a teacher as well as a poet. In his extensive notes of advice, those 'Tips' given to students of English, he highlights the central importance of reading in relation to humanity and, in a way, prepares us for the reactions of those contributors whose engagement with the lifetime's work of this central figure has proved to be the real starting-point for this book:

> When a reading of text has proceeded by laborious stages within the test-rig of detailed study, pause to allow the overall effect to integrate back into a coherent human reading, and ponder whether your life may even have been changed, just a little, or your beliefs about large questions; whether your habits of feeling have been flattered or boastfully challenged, or whether your relation to the text builds up a kind of trust. This aspect is what you will take away with you when all the study is finished, and it should last you through a lifetime.