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Review

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REVIEW

Book Reviews

Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry by
Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Gareth Farmer (ed.), Bristol:
Shearsman, 240 pp., 2016.

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In their editorial for the first issue of this journal, Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston call Veronica Forrest-Thomson the ‘most accomplished poetic theorist’ of British innovative poetry.¹ With her death in 1975 at the age of 27, they suggest, this poetry was robbed of its great explainer. If true, this is in some ways difficult to square with how Forrest-Thomson’s major work, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, has been received – its critics have accused it, not always in print, of being incompletely thought through and less than cogent, while her early, pioneering readings of J. H. Prynne and John Ashbery are discounted or marginalised in critiques of both poets despite her position as the first academic critic in Britain to write seriously about either of them. In general, her work has been neglected, as evidenced by the scant number of papers and books about her. Doubtless this was worsened by the fact that *Poetic Artifice* has been out of print since the limited print-run of the original 1978 edition. This has now been rectified with the 2016 publication by Shearsman of this new edition, edited by Gareth Farmer.

Previously, the student new to innovative writing and to Forrest-Thomson encountered her work as a kind of known unknown – many people with a familiarity with the subject would have read her, and she would appear in surveys and footnotes, but detailed discussions of either her poetry or her contribution to literary theory were absent. An introduction might have been sought from Alison Mark’s 2001 study, which figures Forrest-Thomson as a forerunner of North American ‘language poetry’, although this has sometimes made *Poetic Artifice* unpalatable to those who follow

Charles Bernstein's interpretation of its vexed category of the 'non-meaningful'. Another resource, the 2009 special issue of the *Kenyon Review*, features a range of informed and intriguing new approaches from prominent scholars, but is perhaps too prismatic to be useful to the tiro. This new edition and new introduction, however, will make Forrest-Thomson's theory (and, it is to be hoped, her poetry, with which it is inextricably bound) accessible to as wide an audience as is willing to take on this complex, idiosyncratic, often elliptical, but ultimately deeply rewarding work.

Essentially, *Poetic Artifice* aims to elaborate a way of reading poetry to ensure 'good naturalisation', that is, a reading which introduces just enough external context to the poem, no more, no less. Those new to reading poetry often struggle to deal with its difficulty by introducing as many external contexts as possible – this is why confessional writing and the poetry of the First World War dominate school syllabi. For Forrest-Thomson, however, 'poetry's strength and its defence' is its artifice, the way we appreciate it through its formal and stylistic nature.² She therefore constructs a daunting model of the poem introducing a series of 'levels', elements of a poem, arranged along a 'scale of limitation/expansion' which attempts to direct how much the reader refers to 'external contexts' and therefore ensure that the reading of the poem is determined by 'poetic logic' or artifice (pp. 38–9). This concept draws on a wide range of theories of poetry, literature, and language in general, which are elaborated in detail in Farmer's introduction. Forrest-Thomson, however, lays them out in both her 'Preface' (which features a puzzling diagram of the schema) and 'Introduction' as if they are far more neutral and obvious, which can prove discouraging to the new reader. But having forged through Forrest-Thomson's technical introduction we find an elaboration of a far more easily accessible notion of 'continuity', or rather the balance between poetry's continuity with and relevance to the world and its discontinuity with it, its special uniqueness and artifice, which it will be the object of the book to explain.

Along with continuity and discontinuity, another essential idea is the connection between two apparent binaries: pastoral and parody are shown to be analogous to content and technique respectively. Forrest-Thomson derives from William

Empson, one of her primary influences, an understanding of pastoral as one of the fundamental genres or ideas in English literature, but her close identification of it with content in all poetry is idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, her analysis of Dada as a parodic and therefore artifice-centred literary practice neatly lines it up against high English modernism and explains how it prevents critics from collapsing it into 'banal comment on life' (p. 185). Her skewering of Ted Hughes, whose prosody she calls 'spineless recitative' (p. 208), is, whether we think it is deserved or not, enjoyable for its sheer vitriol, but she is also making a serious point: when 'thematic preoccupations are not questioned by their use in a poem [...] poetic language does not have to stretch itself to accommodate new kinds of discourse' (p. 209). This is her case for innovation; everyone else she discusses, from Ashbery to Plath, can manage an effective image-complex, which might also be described as experimental imagery, an image which surprises and even disorients the reader because it has no 'sense' except a structural, artificial sense in the poem (p. 218). This argument is both the stumbling-block for the first-time reader of Forrest-Thomson and the difficult and vulnerable position that for forty years *Poetic Artifice* has defended uncompromisingly.

Although this is a new edition, designed to fit into the twenty-first-century bookshelf and bibliography, a delicate balance has been struck and the spirit of the 1970s original faithfully retained. Even the cover evokes the dust-jacket of the original, the rain of upward-fading pink circles against black becoming a simpler evocation, three solid red ones. Alterations to the text are subtle, but serve to make the text more useful and useable for the contemporary reader and researcher. They include modernisation and standardisation of spellings and referencing, but leave in everything a 'second thought' would have retained. As Farmer explains in a note on the text following the introduction, there are grammatical and other errors which add to the already non-trivial effort of reading and understanding *Poetic Artifice*. There are also editorial emendations in new footnotes (as in the 1978 edition, Forrest-Thomson's are endnotes), which mostly provide missing references, although there are some important and fascinating connections drawn.

The project of the new introduction is in part to situate Forrest-Thomson historically. Although it is often implied in criticism of her work, there has in fact been little scholarship on the relationship between Forrest-Thomson and 'French theory'; she was interested in aspects of structuralism and deconstruction but her relationship to other writing in *Tel Quel* is tenuous at best; Farmer quotes from Forrest-Thomson's correspondence on her engaged but highly partial relationship to the *Tel Quel* group (p. 11). The new edition also features a one-page 'biographical sketch', and offers 'Further Reading' which, although only four pages long, represents a bibliography of the bulk of the published writing on Forrest-Thomson as of the beginning of 2016 and the introduction is informed by the full breadth of this, making it now the most comprehensive short beginner's guide not just to *Poetic Artifice* but to Forrest-Thomson as a writer and thinker.

This reconstruction is all the more useful because the text is in many ways incomplete – indications are that Forrest-Thomson did not show it to anyone before her death, and Graham Hough, in the Foreword to the original 1978 edition, implies that some of her ideas would have been altered eventually by 'second thoughts'.³ Forrest-Thomson says so herself: 'The tentative character of my proposals will be sufficiently obvious to any reader who reflects upon them and discovers their limitations and inadequacies' (p. 33). One of the most prominent of these is the question of the 'non-meaningful'. Charles Bernstein, in his 1987 poem-essay 'Artifice of Absorption', writes that Forrest-Thomson is wrong to declare features of sounds, form, and syntax to be, as he misquotes, 'meaningless': 'After all, meaning occurs | only in a context of conscious & nonconscious, | recuperable & unrecoverable, dynamics.'⁴

Never content to leave a dynamic unrecovered, Forrest-Thomson attempts a taxonomy of 'obscurity': she identifies both rational and irrational, or 'tendentious', obscurity. Rational obscurity can eventually be explained, like the allusions, archaic words and styles, and internal resonances of Pound's *Cantos*. Tendentious obscurity, on the other hand, can never be resolved in this way, and characterises the poetry of John Ashbery and J. H. Prynne. As mentioned above, Forrest-Thomson is one of the first scholars to write academically about either of these poets, and although these

readings may be idiosyncratic, they also anticipate long critical trends of seeing both writers as resisting a purely meditative mode in favour of a formal pattern. Rather than the common charge levelled against both poets that their work is 'inaccessible', she writes that 'the reader has been made an expert' (p. 219) by the way in which their attention is directed in the poems – their own logic of artifice is what gives us 'access'. Forrest-Thomson is a key if slightly unconventional critic of high modernism, but never exalts it gratuitously. Her clear-eyed readings of one of its most-read short poems – Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' – and one of its most puzzled-over artefacts – T. S. Eliot's 'A Cooking Egg' – entertainingly and systematically reason out their stickiest aporias. These individual readings of poems are perhaps the most overlooked element of *Poetic Artifice*; Forrest-Thomson is not only a theorist with a grand plan, but so great is her determination to prove the efficacy of her system that the book is filled with dazzling but brief exemplary critiques.

Poetic Artifice is a product of its time, but not in the most obvious ways. Forrest-Thomson indulges the dogma and extremes of neither the New Criticism nor structuralism, but provides a pragmatic synthesis of the two. So is it simply a document, part of the 'anthropology and archaeology of critical discourse' (Farmer, p. 21) of a few curious histories – the aftermath of the New Criticism, the reception of innovative writing, the Anglophone world's struggles to come to terms with structuralism? Or does it still have something else to say to us about how poetry can best be read?

At the end of the book's last chapter – it lacks a conventional conclusion section – Forrest-Thomson articulates what has been surprising to some (and irksome to others; Marjorie Perloff, in one of the original reviews of *Poetic Artifice*, writes that she 'overrates Plath' [quoted in Farmer, p. 13]), a defence of Sylvia Plath's 'striking' deployment of artifice. However, the sympathy between Forrest-Thomson and Plath's practice is clear when we consider *Poetic Artifice's* credo that '[t]he worst disservice criticism can do to poetry is to try to understand it too soon' (p. 223). The discussion of Plath's poem 'Purdah' in the book's final pages offers a biographical reading of the kind that has so dominated criticism of Plath's work as to crowd out formal criticism

of her, and then, using *Poetic Artifice's* distinction between 'empirical' and 'discursive' imagery, shows how this reading collapses utterly in the final stanza. The very last poetic image considered in the book is Plath's 'cloak of holes': 'the "I" is clothed in its negation', says Forrest-Thomson (p. 226). She sees into the heart of the confessional world that is usually opposed to the innovative poetry she investigates and typifies.

Forrest-Thomson always makes it clear that her poetry is not intended to stop people 'wrenching a message' from poems. Indeed, she writes, 'it is part of their purpose to provide a wrenchable message for those who like wrenching and messages' (p. 185). Behind the dry Miss Brodie tone ('for those who like that sort of thing, that is the sort of thing they like'), we can see the real theoretical and, in a way, spiritual issue that *Poetic Artifice* helps us address. That something so high and fine as a poem could be reduced to something as 'banal' as a comment on life, an interpretation, or a *message* is always going to be a wrench. Yet this is complemented by the idea that, as Forrest-Thomson's friend Edwin Morgan wrote, 'nothing is not giving messages'.⁵ Everything about a poem takes part in communication and by listening for all of it, we find that the 'non-meaningful' is well-named after all, but that this is no impediment to messages. Clothing the meaning of the poem in its negation, poetic artifice becomes the cloak of holes.

Notes

¹ Robert Sheppard and Scott Thurston, 'Editorial', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* 1:1 (2009), 3–9 (p. 6).

² Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Collected Poems* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2008), p. 169.

³ Graham Hough, 'Foreword' in Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 7.

⁴ Charles Bernstein, 'Artifice of Absorption', *Paper Air* 4:1 (1987), p. 8.

⁵ This favourite aphorism of Morgan's was used as the title for a book of interviews and other texts. Edwin Morgan, *Nothing Is Not Giving Messages: Reflections on his Work and Life* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1990).

Levity of Design: Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne by Wit Píetrzak, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 162 pp., 2012.

On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne by Matthew Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 226 pp., 2015.

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At the Anna Mendelssohn symposium held at the University of Sussex in February 2017, the discussion following on one of the day's panels tore open a methodological abyss when several speakers and attendees admitted to having experienced, and continuing to experience, extreme uncertainty with regard to how Mendelssohn's work, so openly subversive of the academic study of poetry, might at all be approached. This moment of an openly-stated intellectual and ethical helplessness did not constitute a critical impasse, but bright, relieving clarification: suddenly it made sense to start talking, from within hell, no knowing-already assumed. Given that, by contrast to Anna Mendelssohn (whose time in and relation to Cambridge was fraught and precarious), J. H. Prynne has been based at Cambridge University with such stability throughout his career, and given that many of his works inhabit scholarly or mock-scholarly forms (as indicated for instance by the bibliographic references given in works as early as 'Aristeas, in Seven Years' (from *The White Stones*, 1969) and as late as *Kazoo Dreamboats; or, On What There Is* (2011)), it might be thought that his oeuvre would be more immediately approachable via tested scholarly ways. Instead, it has inhabited a strange point of contradiction: while Prynne is generally considered as something of a special-interest author, a scholar writing with a view to the future exegesis of his work, many of those writing on Prynne have remarked on the poems' scholarly impenetrability. The latter experience is perhaps expressed nowhere more eloquently than in Timothy Thornton's response to *Acrylic Tips* as leaving him 'frustrated', 'indignant, dumbstruck, and annoyed' and as affecting

him physically and emotionally: 'it makes me feel unwell'.¹ In spite of the amount of essays and theses produced on Prynne over the past decades, it becomes clear that critical responses to Prynne's poetry, too, are still involved in a struggle of how even to begin talking about this work, and of how even to begin reckoning with the physical, emotional, cerebral impact it exerts.

This may also have to do with the fact that Prynne himself seems unwilling to put the lid on his work, as indicated by the fact that since the publication of the 2015 edition of *Poems*, which some may have seen as a conclusive monument to a life's work, Prynne has continued to write with unceasing productivity, publishing two new chap-books in 2017: *Each to Each* (Cambridge: Equipage) and *Of the Abyss* (Cambridge: Materials). As much as Prynne is really just starting out as a poet, then, so is criticism on Prynne, and the two volumes to be reviewed here, Wit Piętrzak's *Levity of Design: Man and Modernity in the Poetry of J. H. Prynne* (2012, in the following abbreviated as *LD*) and Matthew Hall's *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* (2015, in the following abbreviated as *OVW*), both published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, are among the first single-author publications presenting extended thematic readings of Prynne's work across several decades, in Piętrzak's case ranging from *Kitchen Poems* (1968) to *Blue Slides at Rest* [2004], and in Hall's case from *Brass* (1971) to 'Refuse Collection' [2004]. The scope the monographs achieve certainly seems facilitated by the *Poems* tome (Piętrzak refers to the 2005 edition, Hall to the 2015 edition), in the sense that it perhaps suggests a greater coherence to a singular author's life's work than dispersed pamphlets to be chased up would. Piętrzak makes full use of the plenitude offered by the *Poems* as a resource, extending his argument along readings of *Kitchen Poems* (1968), *The White Stones* (1969), *Brass* (1971), *Wound Response* (1974), *News of Warring Clans* (1977), *Down where changed* (1979), *The Oval Window* (1983), *Bands Around the Throat* (1987), *Word Order* (1989), *For the Monogram* (1997), *Pearls That Were* (1999), *Biting the Air* (2003) and *Blue Slides at Rest* [2004]. As a result of such quantities of reference, individual passages and sequences are sometimes discussed too briefly. A sense of the author flying by the poems is exacerbated by the fact that cited passages are not precisely referenced,

both in that Piętrzak establishes no page and line number system when referring to a poem, and in that indented citations are mostly reproduced left-bound and thus do not always accurately reproduce the original's graphic movement (see for instance the citation from 'Quality in that Case as Pressure' (*LD*, p. 49)).

Still, a hasty reading across Prynne's oeuvre is not automatically to be considered a problem. Given Prynne's use of repetition and variation across his work and with increased fervour across his late work, jumping quickly from sequence to sequence to understand better the development of a particular terminology or turn of phrase in relation to changes or stabilities in historico-political environments might be fruitful for some scholarly inquiries. There are moments at which Piętrzak does point to such resonances across sequences, for instance when he discusses Prynne's use of 'fear' in *Brass* and *News of Warring Clans*. First, Piętrzak quotes from 'The Ideal Star-Fighter' from *Brass* these lines: 'the politic | albino. The faded bird droops in his | cage called fear'.² A few pages later, he quotes the following passage from *News of Warring Clans*: 'The most | audacious lies pack the throat with steam, | we mean the full irony of fear and then cancel | all but the head banner (the instruction | to "be frightened")' (*P*, p. 285, ll. 12–16). The chance of linking the two occurrences incisively, however, is passed by when Piętrzak reads 'his | cage called fear' at face value as the expression of an 'anxiety-ridden world in which volition has been reduced to inaction', noting that a 'metaphysical condition of fear is never to be alleviated' (*LD*, p. 71). Such a reading seems inattentive to the sharply mocking aspect inscribed into the construction of a 'cage called fear', particularly as it is preceded by the satirically racialising implications of a 'politic | albino' (a white Albion?), making the passage read less as an expression of metaphysical angst than as a precise description of the cages inhabited by the Breitbart editorial team in 2017. In his reading of the corresponding passage from *News of Warring Clans*, Piętrzak then does capture the critical distance Prynne inhabits to 'fear' more accurately, suggesting that the poem reflects on how the 'injunction to "be frightened," to which the fear is reduced, becomes a means of ensuring that the news is attended to' (*LD*, p. 84). To turn the slight anachronism of the allusion to Breitbart around, the cultures of fear invoked as marking

the current rise of the right in Europe and the US has – of course – not emerged out of nowhere. It can be traced through its varying manifestations and permutations across the post-war era, and such a refracted tracing is, not least, conducted across *Brass and News of Warring Clans*.

Aside from the exposure of constellations of particular terms across the sequences as sketched, a second aspect that holds Piętrzak's study together is the clear structure the critic establishes between reading Prynne's work up to *The Oval Window* (1983) as primarily based on a 'Heideggerian premise', and the work from *The Oval Window* onwards as performing an 'Adornian negative dialectic' (*LD*, p. 2). Piętrzak's over-arching theoretical interest being that of the position of the (late-modern) subject in Prynne's work, he suggests that in the earlier work, 'the modern subject continues to be a strong ego' (*LD*, p. 102). Thus there is scope in Heidegger, and in Prynne's Heideggerian poetics, for 'the subject's overcoming of its condition of ossification into a dead text' (*LD*, p. 96). In Adorno, and in those Prynne poems Piętrzak relates to Adorno's negative dialectics, we then no longer find a 'promise of fullness'. Nevertheless, affirmative possibilities are opened by an 'anti-systemic struggle with all forms of such fullness' (*LD*, p. 96). While they open different routes for an articulation of subjectivity, Piętrzak ultimately sees Heidegger and Adorno allied in difference: '[a]rt, in the present case poetry, as both thinkers seem to concur, provides a path beyond the optimisation and passive imitation that drives Western society' (*LD*, p. 95). As a result, we observe a degree of continuity across Piętrzak's chapters even across the Heidegger/Adorno breaking point. This continuity is based on the diagnosis of processes of 'ossification' (*LD*, p. 96) and 'fossilising' (*LD*, p. 104) that man [*sic*], in constant struggle with linguistic cliché, experiences under the late-modern condition. Such a diagnosis seems underpinned by a sometimes frustratingly generalised cultural pessimism, at least to the extent that it is not substantiated by any specified economic analysis. After all, in the second half of the twentieth century and beginning decades of the twenty-first century, 'man', and especially all those others who are not 'man', have been more likely to suffer from the conditions of wage labour, scarcity of housing, the effects of colonialism or acute instances of

environmentally induced sickness than from a generalised ossification of language. *Levity of Design* is most illuminating where Piętrzak becomes clear in his accounting of concrete political constellations inscribed into Prynne's work. Citing from *Pearls That Were* the stanza 'Too single! caress fronds as to liberate | race hatred's package tour | whose every touch, kiss the rising hand | will too bleach-whiten yours' (*P*, p. 458, ll. 13–16), Piętrzak exclaims with what feels like a real and important anger pointing to the real and important anger underlying Prynne's work: '[e]ven a touch of race hatred can wreak damage by deceiving one into a belief that only abhorring others can make one into a true – what? Patriot? White? There is no responding to such a claim. Racism is here doubly associated with the white society and capitalist culture, represented by the English tourist invention of a package tour' (*LD*, p. 131).

The question that drives Piętrzak's study, that of the articulation or positioning of the subject in Prynne's work, can serve to instigate further critical work insofar as it seems driven by the following underlying question: if the reference points presented by Prynne's poetry branch out into directions that seem to exceed traceability, then how can we know that it resists 'the poststructuralist impasse' (*LD*, p. 22) of endlessly proliferating arbitrary reference? In this sense, the subject in Piętrzak might be considered a figuration that stands in for a sense of constraint that renders the work binding in terms of its 'rejection of postmodernism's vision of the immateriality of the world' (*LD*, p. 7). In this refutation of an immateriality of the world, we can see the most obvious point of coalescence between Piętrzak's volume and Matthew Hall's *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* (2015; a revised version of his PhD thesis, *Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* (University of Western Australia, 2014)). Hall introduces his study with the following citation from Prynne: 'It has mostly been my own aspiration, for example, to establish relations not personally with the reader, but with the world and its layers of shifted but recognisable usage; and thereby with the reader's own positions within this world' (*OVW*, p. 1). What for Hall firmly commits Prynne's poetry to a relation 'with the world' is its attentiveness to, and charting of, the 'perpetration of violence, its integration into power structures and its representation' (*OVW*, p. 1).

While Hall's study spans work across four decades, it is more focused than *Levity of Design* in establishing plateaus of rest and reflection. Each of the five chapters engages primarily with one poem or sequence. These are 'Es Lebe der König' (*Brass*, 1971), *News of Warring Clans* (1977), *Bands Around the Throat* (1987), *Acrylic Tips* (2002) and 'Refuse Collection' [2004]. The stated claim is that '[e]ach chapter couples instances of violence with a philosophical investigation on the basis of the historical paradigm under discussion' (*OVW*, p. 2). In practice, the links made between a particular philosophical approach and the respective poem discussed often appear loose. Hall appeals to a wide variety of philosophers (including: Alain Badiou, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, Martin Heidegger, Jürgen Habermas, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz), yet establishes no clear sense of how the named philosophers' conceptions of violence might have affected – or be made to affect – one another beyond their separate applicability to separate passages from Prynne's work.

This is perhaps a minor problem given that *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* primarily presents an interrogation not into philosophical accounts of violence, but into what Hall calls almost programmatically Prynne's 'poetic' (*OVW*, p. 1). In terms of this 'poetic', the monograph becomes most illuminating where it pays attention to what might be called, firstly, the vehicles of violence in Prynne's work, secondly its landscapes, and thirdly, to how it tends to evoke violence less in thematic content than in particular manners of speech and song. An example of what I mean by vehicles of violence is Hall's assertion that in *News of Warring Clans*, 'violence and control are expressed in and through offerings of food and material goods coupled with the threat of denial' (*OVW*, p. 70). In terms of the settings of violence, the early-stated observation that in Prynne's work, 'the representation of the landscape is always a political utterance, a literary framework that highlights issues of control, distortion and degradation' (*OVW*, p. 3) remains continuously central to the monograph. In his reading of 'Lend a Hand' and 'Fresh Running Water' from *Bands Around the Throat*, Hall combines his reflections concerning the role of the distribution of food and drink, on the one hand, and political landscapes of control on the other; furthermore, he also attends to the third aspect named above, that of how particular

manners of speech can in and of themselves constitute a representation of violence. This synthesis of elements occurs when Hall notes that 'Fresh Running Water' is 'a sardonic play on UNICEF's advertising campaign aimed at collecting donations to dig wells and provide the basic necessities of life to remote African communities' (*OVW*, p. 103) and that the 'language games and children's verse that filter through the collection function as a safety device, a childlike regression from the horror of bearing witness' (*OVW*, p. 104).

The most prolonged and original argument we find on the complex of landscape, power and utterance occurs in the chapter on *Acrylic Tips*. Noting that '[a]side from [Andrea] Brady's reference to Woomera asylum seekers, no mention of Australia has been given in any of the critical literature on the poem to date' (*OVW*, p. 132), Hall expands on the link to Australia on the basis of biographical circumstances. Noting Prynne's time as a Visiting Scholar at Edith Cowan University, in Perth, Western Australia, in 2002, he suggests that the dedication in the Barque edition of the work, 'S. K.', most likely refers to John Kinsella's brother, Stephen Kinsella, a shearer in rural Australia (*OVW*, pp. 130–32). Hall subsequently develops a sustained reading of the sequence in relation to the (British-colonialist) declaration of Australia as a *terra nullius*. Given the interest the chapter provides in expanding on how colonialist-indigenous relations, Australian policies on refugees and the economics of land usage found in Australia are inscribed into *Acrylic Tips*, the chapter's conclusion, claiming that the sequence is ultimately 'cathartic in that it offers a release from the pressures of violence, both from the relationship depicted as well as from the long trace of colonisation' (*OVW*, p. 164) appears simplifying and all too soothing – as does the thesis repeatedly put forward in the earlier chapter on 'Es Lebe der König' (*OVW*, p. 10) of the poem offering 'consolation' (*OVW*, p. 10) in relation to Paul Celan's death and the violence of the Holocaust. Given that catharsis and consolation each constitute far-reaching terms of reconciliation, they seem handled too casually, not least in light of the evident asymmetry between a poem or a sequence of poems and the histories of the Holocaust and colonialism, respectively.

Hall combines a slightly shaky philosophical terminology with some incisive readings of poetic detail; Piętrzak constructs a more stable philosophical framework that at times reads over more than from within Prynne's poems. There is a slightly preliminary, under-worked feel to both volumes (for which the publisher, Cambridge Scholars, might hold some responsibility), but *Levity of Design* and *On Violence in the Work of J. H. Prynne* coalesce in their motivation to understand better Prynne's refusal of what Piętrzak calls 'the textualist perception of the world' (*LD*, p. 8). Through a study of the forms of expression, representation and erasure of subjectivity and of violence in Prynne's work, respectively, the two critics present an image of how the question of difficulty in Prynne's work ultimately concerns a question of difficulty in the world.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Notes

- ¹ Timothy Thornton, 'Acrylic Tips', in *On the Late Poetry of J. H. Prynne*, ed. by Joe Luna and Jow Lindsay Walton (Brighton: Hi Zero & Sad Press, 2014), pp. 77–85 (p. 77).
- ² J. H. Prynne, 'The Ideal Star-Fighter' in *Poems* (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2015), pp. 165–66 (p. 165, ll. 3–5). All following references to works cited from *Poems* will be abbreviated as *P* and given in the text.

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