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## ARTICLE

# Following John Wilkinson

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This article reads closely John Wilkinson's essay 'Following the Poem' (2007) alongside some of Wilkinson's poetry from the 1980s and 1990s. Using the work of Donald Winnicott as a touchstone, the article critically evaluates the claims made in Wilkinson's essay about fullness and intersubjectivity against some of his poetry's expressions of fragmentation and dismemberment. The article concludes with some reflections on Wilkinson's quotation of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound in Proud Flesh* (1986), and on the later collection *Hid Lip* (1992). It argues that an illuminating disparity or contradiction exists between the avowed aim of the reading practices described and advocated in 'Following the Poem,' and the state of the subjects repeatedly presented in Wilkinson's poetry. The article finally suggests that this contradiction itself speaks volumes about the kind of world in which both poetry and poetics exist.

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**Keywords:** John Wilkinson; Donald Winnicott; Object Relations; Percy Bysshe Shelley

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John Wilkinson's essay 'Following the Poem, or, Misty Thoughts on Winnicott, Celan and Shelley,' originally delivered as a lecture at the University of Notre Dame in 2004, describes and advocates a kind of close reading.<sup>1</sup> The kind of close reading it advocates is named 'following a poem,' and is described early on in the essay as a reader's involvement in 'the evocation and enactment of a radical hybridity.'<sup>2</sup> This reading practice is instrumental: it works towards the realisation of a specific end or goal, a goal expressed, in the essay, in the language of healthy, restorative satiety. By following a poem, 'a reader unpicks and re-integrates elements of the poem in a felt motion which can restore a healed and full being in the world[.]'<sup>3</sup> The space of 'hybridity' that following a poem opens up is an accommodating, restorative one; the type of being replenished by following a poem is as responsive to loss and lack as it is to plenitude and stimulation. Someone following a poem may find the potential for restoration as much through positive re-integration as through the negative space of 'the detours, the lapses and the breaks in his or her journey.'<sup>4</sup> Reading a poem is thus described in terms of a 'journey' of stops and starts, one that entails the mediation of positive and negative space, words and the gaps between them, and as such one that 'connects a reader with a dense, intersubjective world entirely distinct from postmodern filminess.'<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson gives three examples of following poems: Peter Szondi's reading of Celan's 'Engführung,' and his own readings of Herbert and Shelley. These readings are close engagements with the processes of corporeality, materiality and excess that emerge through sonority and diction in each case; they do not claim to be summations or interpretations, but rather glimpses of, and addenda to, the thinking that is already taking place in the poems. The readings are perhaps best described as sympathetic commentaries. At all times, Wilkinson is at pains not to produce 'neatly extracted set[s] of readings' which would do poetic language an injustice; the aim is

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<sup>1</sup> John Wilkinson, *The Lyric Touch* (Great Wilbraham: Salt Publishing, 2007), pp. 195–211.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

to 'follow [the poem's] thought rather than set out its products.'<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, Wilkinson argues, '[t]he objects of thought we extract from poems are mere stones until restored to prosody.'<sup>7</sup>

These thoughts are as compelling as they are 'misty,' and they raise many questions. How does the method Wilkinson advocates differ from, or contribute to, such established canonical motifs as the heresy of paraphrase, or the much-maligned and fought over deconstructive injunction *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*? What is the nature of the 'hybridity' discovered by such a method? Is this hybridity *only* available in poems? Can any poem be followed – or only those whose content lends itself to being unpicked and reintegrated? What advantages has the experience of prosody over any other experience for restoring a 'full being in the world'? What does Wilkinson mean by 'intersubjectivity,' exactly? In the short course of the essay's seventeen pages, the 'dense, intersubjective world' is never more than alluded to. Its definition is problematic, since 'Following the Poem' suggests several different interpretations of the term. One interpretation is underpinned by Wilkinson's reading of D. W. Winnicott's essay, 'The Use of an Object and Relating through Identifications.'<sup>8</sup> Winnicott's essay describes the process by which an infant begins to recognise the failure of its omnipotence and the preponderance of the objective world into which it was born and in which it must survive. That is, the process which entails 'the move away from self-containment and relating to subjective objects into the realm of object-usage.'<sup>9</sup> In the former state of 'self-containment,' transitional objects point the way to the latter realm of objectivity. Since the infant at the stage of 'self-containment' does not separate itself from the world in which it finds itself, the way it relates to objects is

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* It should be noted that by 'prosody,' Wilkinson refers to the entire gamut of formal aspects of versification, not simply metrics. There appears no barometer of value in the essay that would determine which poems are worth following and which are not, save the bracketed concession that 'not just any poem' is capable of delivering the results obtained by following, for example, Celan or Shelley.

<sup>8</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd and Madeleine Davis (London: Karnac Books, 1989), pp. 218–227.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

necessary paradoxical: 'the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created and to become a cathected object.'<sup>10</sup> The object is thus both found and created by the baby, for whom an answer to the question 'did you create that or did you find it?' is impossible to elicit.<sup>11</sup> Object-use follows object-relating in the developmental sequence, and necessitates the sundering of self-containment by gradual incursion of the outside world into the baby's field of omnipotent, paradoxical creativity. However, suggests Winnicott, between object-relating and object-use 'is the most difficult thing, perhaps, in human development,'

or the most irksome of all the early failures that come for mending. This thing that there is in between relating and use is the subject's placing of the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control; that is, the subject's perception of the object as an external phenomenon, not as a projective entity, in fact recognition of it as an entity in its own right.<sup>12</sup>

If this recognition is achieved, Winnicott continues, 'then the object is destroyed by the subject' – and equally, 'the destruction of the object places the object outside the area of the subject's omnipotent control.'<sup>13</sup> Emotional development involves this second paradox as part and parcel of maturation: it is the complex of transition between omnipotent infant and developmental subject. Adaptation to the reality principle means recognising the survival of the 'destroyed' object, and the perpetuation of the cycle of destruction and survival that goes on in unconscious fantasy once the subject begins 'to live a life in the world of objects.'<sup>14</sup> The fact that the object survives the infant's destruction of it 'places the object outside the area of objects set up by the subject's projective mental mechanisms,' and thus 'a world of shared reality is

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

created which the subject can use and which can feed back other-than-me substance into the subject.<sup>15</sup>

By treating a poem as analogous to Winnicott's description of a transitional object, 'Following the Poem' imagines poetic language as 'useful' in terms of the introduction of an encounter designated 'intersubjective' – prosody 'engenders a world for mutual use' in which subject and object are disclosed as mutually conditioning.<sup>16</sup> This encounter draws on Winnicott's descriptions of the infant's gradual adaptation to the reality principle in the following ways. Like Winnicott's account of the infant's experience of the transitional object, Wilkinson's account of the experience of reading a poem, whilst not limited by the age or maturity of the reader, articulates the paradox of simultaneously finding and creating an object, and of the survival of the object destroyed by the subject. The world engendered 'for mutual use' by following a poem is this world, the world of shared social environment. But it is also the world of any given poem, of the freshness and vitality of artistic experience and revelation, of the world created by me in my reading of a poem: 'the trace of the journey [of reading a poem] has become a knot [. . .] compacting past, present and future,' a temporal intuiting of totality out of the radical economy of prosodic shape and sound.<sup>17</sup> And even failing to follow the poem provides the attentive reader with the apparatus necessary to recognize the 'shared world' that could be gained by doing so: in damaging a poem by interpreting it using only the mechanisms 'they have been trained to expect,' thus 'destroying' it in unconscious fantasy, the reader comes to recognise the surplus beyond any such interpretation a poem might contain, withhold or display.<sup>18</sup> The poem survives the reader's attacks, since writing is always more irreducible than any extraction of a neat paraphrase could account for. In Wilkinson's essay, the goal of satiety, of 'fullness,' is implicitly linked with the 'dense, intersubjective world.'<sup>19</sup> By following a poem, I restore myself to myself, and

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>16</sup> *The Lyric Touch*, p. 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 204–5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

I integrate myself into an 'edge-world' in which, contra 'postmodern filminess,' the experience of intersubjectivity is made of denser stuff, a 'shared reality' on the brink of inner and outer, a human landscape 'neither objective nor subjective [. . .] at once cognitive and sensual.'<sup>20</sup> By contrast, a clumsy extraction of sovereign meaning is implicitly linked to a bad omnipotence – the infantile critic desperate for a set of stable meanings ready for paraphrase comes across as dangerously and unhealthily unintegrated.

One sense of intersubjectivity here, then, refers to induction into a 'shared reality,' a space of reciprocal interaction, an achievement analogous to, and potentially as crucial as, the achievement of healthy adaptation to the reality principle. I can feel like a whole human being, and I can feel that way despite, alongside and because of my inevitable complicity with a world in which, as 'Following the Poems' paraphrases late capital, 'we live [. . .] in an infantilism of extracting greedily and spewing copiously,' where

use [. . .] never knows its objects except as flows of commodities and rapid-disposal waste, and is based on relationships with objects (such as human beings, rivers and DVDs) rather than engagement with reality.<sup>21</sup>

'Following the Poem' figures 'intersubjectivity' as a relational experience in which the damage done to the subject's understanding of 'use' by the universal mediation of exchange-value is replenished, 'healed,' through an exchange that cannot be exploitative. This exchange cannot be exploitative not because of where it takes place, but because of how it takes place. Following a poem is an experience that wants to be true to 'the way the poetry works,' to the thinking that poetry does, and is.<sup>22</sup> Following a poem also wants to be untrue to the world in which such a reading must take place, since it imagines that such a reading might instantiate 'a reality beyond the exploitation of objects,' one beyond the state of affairs in

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

which relations, subject- or object-, are pervaded by commodification.<sup>23</sup> 'Bare-faced translation of the object into a field demarcated and dominated by the needs of the writer or the lover, turns away from reality.'<sup>24</sup> Following a poem does not, since it insists on the acknowledgement, if not the endorsement, of that reality, the reality of the poem's autonomy *and* of its production of meaning in the service of the projective mechanisms of inherited reading practices. The needs of the reader following a poem are organised under the desire for wholeness, for replenishment, for restoration. The reader following the poem wants to be useful to the poem without exploiting it, so that the poem in turn can point the way to a relationship with reality that is mutually corroborative, beneficial and pleasurable. These are erotic needs and erotic desires. The name 'intersubjectivity' in 'Following the Poem,' is, in one sense, a description of love – not a definitive description, but a description nonetheless – and the kind of close reading which takes place under the sign of 'intersubjectivity' is one that advocates the abandonment of hard-and-fast categorical distinctions, including subjective ones, in favour of the hybridity of loving reciprocity.

'Following the Poem' is a stylised piece of short prose adapted from a lecture. As such it would be wise to acknowledge the risk of over-reading into its argument what may simply be the results of metaphorical cross-pollination over the course of describing a type of readerly attention to prosodic detail. But the attention so described seems to powerfully reflect confirmation of the loved object's worthiness, and the hard-won 'edge-world of intersubjectivity' thereby arrived at exudes an erotic power of theoretical and corporal transformation, wherein the binary categories of self and other, subject and object, cognitive and sensual, collapse.<sup>25</sup> The 'intersubjective world' achieved by 'Following the Poem' draws as much on a version of adult love as it does on infant maturational development.<sup>26</sup> Yet this transformation only gets us so far: following a poem does not fantasise a utopia, it allows us access to the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.



objective plenitude in which we already find ourselves. It reminds us that 'inner life must be pleated with the outside, social world, to engender the simultaneous connection and disconnection which makes loving and thinking possible,' and it ensures 'continuing life.'<sup>27</sup> By the end of Wilkinson's essay, 'a healed and full being in the world,' ready for 'intersubjectivity,' has effectively only become good *enough* – 'radical hybridity' is not revolutionary, but preparatory.<sup>28</sup> Following a poem entails 'the subject's survival and sustaining[.]' I remind myself that I continue to exist with others, that I am alive.<sup>29</sup>

I said above that 'Following the Poem' was a compelling essay, and one of the reasons I think it is so is because of what the essay means for an understanding of Wilkinson's own poetic practice: what 'Following the Poem' describes as the positive achievement of an act of reading, of prosodic identification and reflection, is that which a great deal of the manifest content of Wilkinson's poetry explores negatively as the *impossibility* of such an achievement. In this sense the essay reads, in part at least, as a kind of theoretical wish-fulfilment dreamt by the poetic oeuvre itself. Wilkinson's poems are full of subjects who wish for wholeness, who want to begin, but who can barely survive. And they are also packed to bursting with the mirrors, traps, pseudo-identifications, mistakes, blunders and violence that systematically deny these subjects the wholeness, satiety and 'fullness' they so fervently desire to be able to begin in the first, and every subsequent, place. Subjects in Wilkinson's poems – potential love objects – are surrounded by things, seemingly unending concentric malbowges of things, things who fetishistically dance rings around subjects reduced, in turn, to a slew of depleted lyric persons. 'Following the Poem' is a compelling essay because it writes out as a theoretical wish what the practice of Wilkinson's poetry has for so long cancelled and refused. Wilkinson has, in the past, made cancellation by interrogation a significant part of his writing methodology, avowing in interview that the 1986 serial poem *Proud Flesh*

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203, p. 210.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

represents an attempt to write a love poem [. . .] And it represents a repeated and I hope interesting failure to do so. It tackles centrally the question of relative power in an erotic relationship, or in an erotic need. It questions erotic need at the moment that it arises, and at the moment that it would govern the making of the text. It is uncomfortable with the projections into the loved one which are the basis of the erotic need. It's uncomfortable with the colonization of the loved one by those projections.<sup>30</sup>

The processes of connection and disconnection that 'Following the Poem' dramatises successfully over the course of three separate close readings, remarking after the reading of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, for example, that '[i]ntersubjectivity is born as words are born,' the poems in *Proud Flesh*, (re-printed in 2005, the year after the lecture on which 'Following the Poem' is based was given) dramatise catastrophically, as the flailing, attempted exchanges of lover and beloved alienated and awash in a sea of part objects.<sup>31</sup> '[S]imultaneous connection and disconnection' leading to the possibility of 'loving' and 'thinking' may be possible to exercise, even to realise, by following the poem *Proud Flesh* – but what is striking is that the individual poems therein are built entirely from the wreckage of 'disconnection' itself.<sup>32</sup> In *Proud Flesh*, words engender an abyss between subjects far more than they encourage, let alone give birth to, any intersubjective encounter. Consider this poem:

O where is the breast I left part of my mouth on?  
Where did I leave off? & when you decipher me  
will you find a nothing's opposite, a mere lump  
or tease a catch-all cradle from my fine twist?

No-one holds to categories. The one threatening  
was the one who did, the one who faked, found

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<sup>30</sup> 'How Many Voices You Got? The John Wilkinson Interview, part 2,' in *Angel Exhaust 9* (1993), p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> *The Lyric Touch*, p. 210.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

truth at the end of a false trail. The character  
& the nullity both bleed with unfinished business

You put your head on the rails to hear the spot  
You lift your head to the stars to switch track  
Sadness shakes you through the ear you submit  
to its ebbing voice, & the stars are too constant

A party's in full swing at the end of this line  
but no voice talks to you in the foreground. This  
is the old connection but with lips torn away  
their huge head sunk on the chest in infant pain.<sup>33</sup>

What Andrew Lawson, in a review of Wilkinson's 1988 *Bones of Contention*, calls 'the generalized process [in Wilkinson's poetry] of blocked exchange, of the division between inner and outer, subjective and objective, expression and signification,' takes place in *Proud Flesh* between the fragmented, damaged limbs of the poem's lines and their incarceration in dense, taught quatrains.<sup>34</sup> Form does not so much accommodate content as grudgingly put up with it. The quatrains themselves seem almost perfunctory, chiding the lines into an image of superficial wholeness where there is only a powerful and innervating lack of it. A deep-structure of split-apart, projective and mutually de-constructive mechanisms condition much of the material in *Proud Flesh*, and this poem is no exception. A sample taxonomy of incompleteness would register at least: 'where is the breast,' 'Where did I leave off?', 'a nothing's opposite,' 'a mere lump,' 'the one who faked,' the line-break between 'found' and 'truth,' even before it is found 'at the end of a false trail,' 'unfinished business,' 'no voice talks' and 'with lips torn away.' An 'ebbing voice' confronts 'the stars' that are 'too constant,' as excess and dearth fly back and forth without ever achieving equilib-

<sup>33</sup> John Wilkinson, *Proud Flesh* (Great Wilbraham: Salt Publishing, 2005), p. 50.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Lawson, 'Seeking for Exchange: [review of] John Wilkinson, *Bones of Contention*, (Prest Roots Press, 1988),' in *Fragmente: A Magazine of Contemporary Poetics* 1 (1990), pp. 35–36.

rium. Wholeness is denied to each voice as much as to the dyadic structure of 'you' and 'me,' who are represented as a dysfunctional non-unit. A 'nothing's opposite' is split apart and, hydra-like, becomes 'The character' and 'the nullity,' both of which 'bleed with unfinished business.' This is followed by a mimetic act of cancellation, as the seemingly non-sequitous 'You put your head on the rails to hear the spot' follows the double line-break. The poem glibly alludes to its own strict formality in the last stanza, 'A party's in full swing at the end of this line,' but we are simultaneously blocked off from whatever sociality and communication we might find there, or here, since 'no voice talks to you in the foreground.' The presence, and thus capacity for interaction, of embodied selves is announced by their annihilation in the moment of their attempted utterance: 'no voice,' 'lips torn away.' The 'old connection' is that between the 'categories' of mother and child, lover and lover, subject and object, arranged in a formally distinct pattern of syllabically consistent lines (all are between 10 and 13 syllables long) in which all are equally disbarred from knowing, or even recognising, each other. But in any case, as the poem intones in a mock-concession to cliché political wisdom, 'No-one holds to categories,' and any who claim to do so are faking it, ready to find 'truth at the end of a false trail.' Everyone (and everything) is categorically on their own, in solitary dissolution and disrepair.

The three questions of the first stanza are not rhetorical – they simply go unanswered, left off and abandoned. In the context of the interplay of voices struggling for expression throughout the book, they exceed through sheer traumatised belligerence the rhetorical figure that would contain them, demanding to be fed the answers they will not receive. The opening emphatic syllabic utterance, repeatedly deployed throughout the poems in *Proud Flesh*, is also a figure of excess and demand, of excessive demand. J.H. Prynne, in his 'English Poetry and Emphatical Language,' describes 'the use of lyric *O* [as] a marker for the boundary of one discourse where it is momentarily exceeded by another,' and asserts that,

used strongly, the word may convoke the currencies of previous usage by quoting recursively the power of poetic speech itself, calling it in evidence to locate a dialectic convergence of outward and inward sense.<sup>35</sup>

The 'O's' and 'o's' in *Proud Flesh* assemble the 'power of poetic speech' satirically, sometimes sarcastically, as evidence of a condition of useless, insensitive demand; the evidence they conjure points to a stuck dialectic, a muted exchange, and their cry is more akin to tantrum than to exclamation or elegy. Prynne partly recognises this condition in his essay, which was delivered to the British Academy only two years after the first publication of *Proud Flesh*, by noting that 'recent poetic usage is highly sceptical about such exclamatory particles, and will employ them only with muted or parodic intention.'<sup>36</sup> In lines like 'O where is the breast I left part of my mouth on?,' 'O make life/opposite to death again' and 'o intense inane,' it is the parody of belief in passionate utterance not only to pleat together 'outward and inward sense,' but to even claim that a realistic possibility of such a convergence exists, that renders the emphatic particles so emphatically dumbstruck.<sup>37</sup> The discourse of parody is exceeded by that of infantile need, one which, to quote 'Following the Poem,' is perpetually 'extracting greedily and spewing copiously.'<sup>38</sup> The tone of the 'O' in the poem quoted above is despairing, not elegiacal, since no original condition is nostalgically evoked; the speaking bodies in *Proud Flesh* are sundered since the 'first breach in the sense-world' which began to form them into subjects theoretically capable of completion. Since, however, these subjects find themselves resolutely incomplete, this breach is 'Deceitful,' and 'Thus the original stands/for nothing, stands as the non-sequitur' from which the maturational process can only lead to the transformation of originary loss into a 'nothing's opposite,' constantly

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<sup>35</sup> J.H. Prynne, 'English Language and Emphatical Language,' in *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXXIV (1988), p. 168.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Proud Flesh*, p. 50, p. 42, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> *The Lyric Touch*, p. 197.

flickering between a 'me' that needs deciphering and a 'you' who finds nothing to decipher.<sup>39</sup>

The 'intense inane' noted above is a quotation from the example 'Following the Poem' gives as a profound instance of that strain of poetic thinking indicative of intersubjective sociality, 'the simultaneous connection and disconnection which makes loving and thinking possible.'<sup>40</sup> The phrase is lifted from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. Its appearance in *Proud Flesh* is partly bathetic ventriloquism, lampooning Shelley's lofty idealism with a dose of Shelley's own notoriously phallogentric notions of sexual liberation:

these our pranks

frequent her like witnesses, o intense inane  
they jostle, even the stars are like stops  
that shearing a torso out of fierce love

colonize its phantom limbs to prove her body<sup>41</sup>

The 'intense inane,' the 'formless void of infinite space,' as Donald Reiman glosses it, is apostrophised to witness the horrific 'pranks' of the male gaze 'shearing a torso out of fierce love.' In this passage, the penultimate poem of the book and thus the book's structural climax, the 'our' of 'our pranks' channels the evidence of 'poetic speech itself' in a similar manner to that noted above by the frequent 'O's,' by referring to the male subject and the history of male-dominated love poetry simultaneously. It is a history which *Proud Flesh* seeks to confront and critique rather than to escape, in order to sabotage from the inside out the wounded and wounding nature of the love lyric. One of the arguments of *Proud Flesh* is that the very genre of the love address, when left to fester without due care and attention, becomes a persuasion fraught with the history of domination, 'a lax spring/explaining out its function // like a dis-

<sup>39</sup> *Proud Flesh*, p. 48, p. 71, p. 50.

<sup>40</sup> *The Lyric Touch*, p. 210.

<sup>41</sup> *Proud Flesh*, p. 77.

eased heart' as the final poem of the volume puts it.<sup>42</sup> The 'intense inane' is an appropriately endless void to preside over infantile lyric subjects flailing about *ad infinitum* in mutual antagonism. But there is a more pressing irony to 'intense inane's usage here, which can be explored by examining its history. In Shelley's poem the phrase is used at a critical juncture during the last lines of the Spirit of the Hour's speech at the close of Act III. Shelley's lines here begin as an image of mankind liberated from the machinations of domination, and end up spiralling into the stars:

Exempt from awe, worship, degree, —the King  
Over himself; just, gentle, wise—but man:  
Passionless? no—yet free from guilt or pain  
Which were, for his will made, or suffered them,  
Nor yet exempt, though ruling them like slaves,  
From chance and death and mutability,  
The clogs of that which else might oversoar  
The loftiest star of unascended Heaven  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.<sup>43</sup>

As the verse reaches a fever pitch of dreamy utopian grandeur the grammar fails to contain the sense of such excessive desire in neatly apportioned units, and the lines tumble into a sensuous, tonal echo of the 'Heaven' yet to ascend. The last three lines of this speech enact the infinite desires of emancipated, mortal humanity rising to the spheres by twining the endless and the finite into a syntactical helix. The lines spiral out into spacious cosmic abstraction at the same time as driving into the rhythmical closure epitomised by the pounding spondaic symmetry of 'Pinnacled dim' and 'intense inane.' In the vision of freedom recalled by the Spirit of the Hour, 'man remains/Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed—but man.'<sup>44</sup> He is 'free from [the]

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<sup>42</sup> *Proud Flesh*, p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York, London: WW. Norton & Company, 2002), p. 269.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

guilt or pain' which were part of the tyrant Jupiter's repressive arsenal, 'but' he is resolutely and passionately mortal, emphatically not 'exempt [. . .] From chance and death and mutability,' even though he has made these his 'slaves.' Not 'yet exempt' – they (chance, death and mutability) are still the 'clogs' of the unnamed 'that which else might oversoar' the murky depths of the infinite cosmos. Whatever 'that' is that mankind aspires to, it is chained to earth by the rhythms of mortal life itself, in this world at least. The 'intense inane' names the place in which the image of the limit to human aspiration, to the desire for the most complete realisation of the powers of a humankind undivided by tyranny, is to be found. In naming this limit the verse exceeds it, ending the Spirit of the Hour's speech in the fullness and rapture of spoken confirmation. One obsolete meaning of inane, or 'in-ane,' is '[i]n one accord; in one and the same state; without cessation or interruption, continuously; straightway.'<sup>45</sup> Infinity has the last word, and the void contains its own sequestered dream of confluence and unity. In *Prometheus Unbound*, this dream is achieved and made manifest on earth.

In *Proud Flesh* it is not. In the book's penultimate poem the 'intense inane' is appealed to meta-textually, as a putatively 'Romantic' reference point shorn of its context and made to bear witness over the violence of objectifying desire. It declares by allusion to one absolute apogee of Romantic human ambition the inanity, the emptiness, of what Wilkinson has called in interview the 'lyric impulse' itself:

[. . .] the words from the lyric are something so compromised or so difficult to simply accept, at the very moment of lyric impulse there is also a negation of that, and to that extent I feel that almost everything I do is a sort of failed love poem.<sup>46</sup>

The 'lyric impulse' in *Proud Flesh* is inane because its products are the narcissistic reflections of its own incorporated losses. Stuck inside a bad inversion of Shelleyan infinite plenum, the lovers and other human objects in the book refuse each other

<sup>45</sup> OED online, accessed 16/08/2013.

<sup>46</sup> 'The John Wilkinson Interview,' in *Angel Exhaust* 8 (1992), p. 79.



and are refused by the formal management of their desire by a kind of internalised culture industry, atomising experience into crippling individualist fantasies and magnifying them to monstrously excessive proportions. The subjects of *Proud Flesh* are wholly empty. The book is the most perfectly unforgiving of odes to contemporary alienation, in love as in anything else. Published as it was in the middle of the decade in which British poets, to quote one of the dedicatees of the 2010 re-print of Wilkinson's *Flung Clear*, repeatedly 'awoke in [the] dawn of our daily disgrace' of Thatcherite Conservatism, *Proud Flesh's* depressive position seems natural, even realist.<sup>47</sup>

The closest we come to experiencing a whole subject in John Wilkinson's poetry, especially in the poetry of the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, is the negative satiety of feeling that the refusal of integration to any system of 'reality' is precisely what prevents the subject from being obliterated altogether. Wilkinson's subjects are constantly on the edge of survival, not yet ready to begin but striving to be, trying to find the 'edge-world of intersubjectivity' but more often than not being cut open by it. This is precisely the mode of the exquisite, tiny opening lyric of 1992's *Hid Lip*, 'A Thread':

Rattle on where love displaces you  
cannot face the dependent  
world opening like a flower.

Hide your face refractively where  
swallows work in all nooks  
quick to dart & reach to build

with a few twigs a bit of  
multi-coloured wool you'd snaggle  
hitching this line at the end

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<sup>47</sup> The quotation is from Douglas Oliver's poem *The Infant and the Pearl*. See Douglas Oliver, *Kind* (London, Lewes and Berkeley: Allardyce, Barnett, 1987), p. 162.

you just beg for the whole self a-  
 gain to throw away for this  
 you will stop with no pleach.<sup>48</sup>

This poem reads like an auto-critical coda to *Proud Flesh's* last lines, in which the 'diseased heart' is 'abandon[ed] to the last flutter' in a sacrificial moment of resignation.<sup>49</sup> The short lines trip and spill over each other clumsily but yearningly, the palpable caesura between 'you' and 'cannot' producing a densely affective line-break that seems to militate tenderly against the more brutally efficient incisions that *Proud Flesh* inflicts, and which are sometimes equally as palpably abyssal, sundering lines instead of drawing them together. 'A Thread,' by contrast, sings on its own terms a minuscule song of dedication to the preparatory wholeness it will not stop desiring. The requisite gaudy trash of reality, 'a few twigs a bit of/multi-coloured wood' fail to prevent the embarrassing 'snaggle' from pausing just long enough before 'hitching' for another heavy caesura, this time aided by an ever-so-slight indentation, to instantiate a sensation of depth out of all proportion with the weight of the poem on the page. But the cuts return sharper than ever, and the last stanza's division of 'again' into 'a -/gain' admonishes with an accusation of greed the desire to 'stop with no pleach.' The hyphen mocks the previous stanzas' iterations of pregnant pauses even as it produces, for the briefest of moments in the time of reading, the most eloquent symbol of their commitment to continuity.<sup>50</sup> The 'whole self' is 'beg[ged] for' in order to be 'throw[n] away,' martyred in the service of an integration to reality held in view

<sup>48</sup> John Wilkinson, *Flung Clear: Poems in Six Books* (London: Salt Publishing, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> *Proud Flesh*, p. 79.

<sup>50</sup> And compare this hyphen to the apostrophe that 'ends' a line in 1990's *The Speaking Twins*: 'Humanity'/s the alternate self-same, never so complete/Opposite which opposites packet to grip // in a cannibalised topographical sheet of latex.' See further Simon Jarvis' wonderful commentary on these lines: 'The scission of humanity just at its elision with being, the copula, produces a kind of parantonational squeak or gulp where an apostrophe is invited, impossibly, to end the line, as though 'the human' were to reside not in that ancient heirloom, the rationality of the rational animal, but in this paralinguistic gasp. It is as if in the poem's so-called technique were registered both the nullity of current soundings of the words freedom and humanity, and the falsehood of the despair which would therefore delete them.' Simon Jarvis, 'Unfree Verse: John Wilkinson's *The Speaking Twins*,' in *Paragraph*, Vol. 33 (July 2010), pp. 280–295.

by dint of its deletion, the sickly-sounding 'no pleach' that ends the poem. The subject survives by being told it will never stop needing to try to survive, since it must try to survive by always needing more than the world is prepared to give. In this address, in this telling admonition, is proof of the world it will enter in the form of the concession to reality demanded and extracted by that world.

The 'shared reality' 'Following the Poem' begs for, the mutual interconnectivity signified by 'pleach,' is established by 'A Thread,' not as a condition of the apostrophised subject's wholeness, but at its cost. Intersubjectivity is the price paid for poetic labour's radical hybridity of the sound of embattled desire and the refutation of its implied idealism. Wilkinson's poetry, in this sense, enacts the bare survival of desire in the face of a world built on the continuation of the strict apportionment of its barbarically unequal objects. No 'healed and full being[s]' enter into the poetry's internal economy because they are systematically disbarred from entering it, and they are so because the poetry's commitment to the world into which its broken subjects come crashing involves an attempt to do justice to a shared reality in which many subjects are not 'healed,' and even fewer are 'full.' Millions of them are diseased and/or starving. The contradiction between what 'Following the Poem' wants to instantiate through a reading practice, and what so much of Wilkinson's poetry refuses its own subjects, is instructive: it illustrates both a desire and the social reality from which that desire emerges, the same reality in which that desire falls catastrophically short of realisation. Adorno noted painfully that 'There is tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one shall go hungry any more.'<sup>51</sup> Between John Wilkinson's poetry and his poetics exists another such vulgar imperative: that humans should survive long enough to begin living.

## Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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<sup>51</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 156.

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