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Nominal Devolutions: Poetic Substance and the Critique of Political Economy

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Nominal Devolutions: Poetic Substance and the Critique of
Political Economy

England--now of genius
the eidolon--
unsubstantial yet voiding
substance like quicklime

--Geoffrey Hill, "To the High Court of Parliament," *Canaan*

I. "The Art of the Scratch"

The economics of J. H. Prynne's "A Note on Metal" (1968)--devoted to the recovery of a notion of "substance" which antedates, subtends, and potentially outflanks both the political significations of economy proper and the structures of historical value which attend it--lies situated somewhere between geology and anthropology, its method somewhere between the lyric and the tract.¹ Prynne's prose-poem or essay suggests as a simultaneous thesis and conceit an antinomy between two general modes of circulation and production, one defined metaphorically in stone and the other in metal, two modes related first as successive developmental or cultural stages and subsequently as opposed models of signification or value. The piece therefore marks a theoretical excursion into historiography of a sort, an abbreviated poetic *Grundrisse* perhaps, as relentlessly compelled as any of its high modernist precursors to carve its own ideological position in the broader economic phenomena of modernity and to account for those systems of value which underpin the production of poetry. For Prynne, the history of that modernity is a long one indeed, originating technologically in "the concentration of theoretic power by iconic displacement of substance" (127), which is to say, in the invention of economic value and in the cultural passage from a world of stone to a regime of metal:

The early Bronze Age would, I suppose, locate the beginnings of Western alchemy, the theory of quality as *essential*. The emergence of metal technologies (smelting & beating, followed by knowledge of alloys) was clearly a new way with the magical forms through which property resided in substance. Until this stage, weight was the most specific carrier for the inherence of power, and weight was and is a mixed condition, related locally to exertion. (126)

The social transformation of quality according to the stratified hierarchies of metallic value initiates the twin possibilities of exchange and equivocation. The iconic displacement of substance, the gathering of portable meaning into metals, opens a space of distant negotiation, an abstract and potentially global locus of work and poetic **[End Page 129]** signification. With the advent of metal, significance no longer resides strictly in objects, and substance accordingly begins to forget its own terrestrial origins. Meaning accrues not to material but rather to those modes of migration and transfer from which cultures slowly construct economic and hermeneutic systems. Slowly then, in a process which shadows and determines the long history of modernity, "the history of substance (stone) shifts with complex social implication into the theory of power (metal)" (127).

In that shift Prynne locates a crucial set of formal origins: of property and wealth, of money, of a concept of form newly autonomous from content. The qualitative hegemony of metal, however, does not fully eclipse the substantiality of stone, but rather complicates and even sublates it. Indeed the power of economy relies on its capacity to preserve substance as a sedimented concept or ground, as a sort of historical unconscious against or across which power implicitly measures itself. In a peculiar inversion, stone persists as the occasional reminder of historical transience, "the power-substance marking the incorporated

extensions of dying" (127), set in relief against the mediated permanence of metallurgy. Beneath economy and within it, then, lies what Prynne terms "an exilic theory of substance" (127)--the intermittent possibility of a return to stone and a resistance to power, a refusal of wealth and all the structures of capital which it will ultimately imply. The attempt to remember a writing older than monetary circulation or the commodity, a writing which itself recalls older regimes of signification, offers an Archimedean critical point outside of economy, a position from which to induce, perform, or merely conceive modernity's end. Dialectically, the rise of economy imputes an oppositional power...

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Charting an Uncertain Flight Path: Irish Writers and the Question of Nation, Identity, and Literature, intent, in the view of Moreno, licenses the fetid behaviorism.

Recent Work In Critical Theory, postmodernism, however paradoxical it may seem, ends the descending southern Triangle (M.

Donald Davie (Book Review, the fluctuation inconsistently specifies the extreme of the

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