

## THOMAS CHATTERTON AND BARRY MACSWEENEY: THE INFLUENCE OF ANXIETY

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### ABSTRACT

The influence of Thomas Chatterton on Barry MacSweeney is well documented. The Newcastle born “underground” poet MacSweeney thought that his poetic career resembled the unsung genius of the late eighteenth century, Thomas Chatterton. According to MacSweeney, Chatterton’s untimely death was due to the rejection and deception that he faced from his patron-publisher. Chatterton famously impersonated a medieval monk and claimed that his Rowley Poems were found manuscripts from the thirteenth century. His abortive attempt to prove himself a genius and consequent suicide inculcate a sense of melancholy in MacSweeney, which evidently permeates into his “Brother Wolf”. However, the influence is more than a Bloomian anxiety of capturing or even caricaturing the predecessor. Instead, MacSweeney tries to simulate the life of his alter ego — his “brother wolf”, and participate in a ritualistic death. The death depicted in MacSweeney’s poem manifests a lyrical dispersal of the material body of a poetic figure as if to guarantee poetic geniuses an immaterial niche beyond the reach of selfish critics and patron-publishers.

Harold Bloom famously coined the expression “the anxiety of influence,” and claimed that “the history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-serving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist” (30). Bloom’s theory of poetic influence involves what he calls “two strong, authentic poets” in which the latter poet misreads the “prior poet [in] an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation” (30).

While the influence of Thomas Chatterton on a fellow Newcastle poet Barry MacSweeney is immense, it defies Bloomian notion of anxiety of influence. Writing more than two hundred years after the death of Chatterton, MacSweeney is far from interested in caricaturing the prior poet. He is rather interested in impersonating the poet whose life, MacSweeney feels, resembles his own. His upbringing in a poor-area of Newcastle and his constant wrangling with poverty that clashed with his artistic urge for freedom make Chatterton his poetic cousin, albeit “brother”. MacSweeney viewed Chatterton’s untimely death as a casualty of poverty. This idea dictated MacSweeney’s desire for losing his material self, and finding connection with not only with Chatterton but also with dead

figures whose genius (he feels) were not recognised while they were alive. It seems MacSweeney is more influenced by the actual anxiety of his predecessor than having a Bloomian anxiety of influence.

In *Elegy for January*, Barry MacSweeney introduces himself almost as a hapless victim in the like of Thomas Chatterton:

I was born in Newcastle on Tyne, Northumberland, in July 1948. I am a Cancer. My first book came out at the age of 19. Since 1968, I’ve been making a scanty living through poetry readings, royalties and various other peripheral activities. In October 1968, I had my “world-famous fifteen minutes” when nominated for the sacred Poetry Chair at Oxford University. (6)

The maimed and melancholic mood of MacSweeney, shared in the above excerpt, belies the promising start of his poetic career. He wrote his first book *The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother* (1969) when he was only 16. The title alludes to Rimbaud’s *At the Green Cabaret*, in which a rural boy’s visit to a city cabaret in search of food (“bread and cold ham”) takes an erotic twist that implies the visitor’s coming-of-age, and eventually becomes a mirror image of the way the city (i.e. Green Cabaret)

invades “the rural theme” with all its vulgarity and enormousness (implied by the size of breasts of the waitress). MacSweeney’s juvenile poem turns Rimbaud’s “pink ham” into “red mitte” in his native Newcastle accent, and “the sun that stays late” into “the sun’s last lances lingering lovingly.” MacSweeney’s ability to capture the continental overtone of modernity impressed his publisher Hutchinson. They wanted to promote their “rare catch” (*Wolf Tongue* 32) discovered as part of their “New Authors Programme”. As a publicity stunt, Hutchinson pulled strings to get the young boy from a poor working class background nominated for the Oxford Chair for Poetry. While talking to Eric Mottram, MacSweeney conceded that he later found out that the whole thing was stage-managed by his publisher who reportedly “bribed” Oxford with two MA stipends in exchange of his nomination for the coveted Oxford Chair (*Poetry Information* 30). With only three votes in his support, MacSweeney had a taste of reality. Later, MacSweeney felt equally duped by the establishment when his reaction to the death of a teenager in Meadowell riots depicted in *Hellhound Memos* (1992) was included in the Paladin anthology *The Tempers of Hazard* (1993); but was later pulped (Johnson Web).

The constant feeling of being betrayed by his own patrons leads MacSweeney to identify himself with Thomas Chatterton. In *Elegy for January*, he explains, “Chatterton was abused—because he was young, not of a particularly ‘distinguished’ literary background, [which] was why Walpole rejected him” (22). Chatterton, of course, was scandalised for his famed forgery of *The Rowley Poems*, supposedly written by a 13th century monk. Chatterton came across some antiquarian materials in a parish that his father was attending. This leads Chatterton to invent a dialect that was a supposed mixture of Latin and Old English. He gave the manuscript to Horace Walpole. The anachronistic forgery was found out as Chatterton applied Spenserian diction to the credit of a Middle Age monk. However, MacSweeney holds that the poetic merit of *The Rowley Poems* was far greater than the invented claims. He retorts, “When Walpole was convinced they were not genuine, he should have seen in them the buds of a poetic genius, an angel of language, that in my mind stands along with Shelley in great youth” (22). This is where MacSweeney’s bibliographical account of Chatterton, *Elegy for January*, gets personal. MacSweeney passionately proclaims:

You are the elegant, eloquent, poet, my brother! The creator of the most beautiful poetry. You are the wolf. I read again, and again: Alas! I cannot sing – I howl – I cry! What is there, after youth, but sleep, and death, and loss of instinctive beauty? (23)

MacSweeney, thus, emotionally connects with both Chatterton and all young geniuses who were never appreciated or did not live to see their fame; Percy Bysshe Shelley, Rimbaud, and Jim Morrison, for instance. Published in 1970, MacSweeney’s personal account echoes the general mood of a “Rebel without a Cause” of the sixties. The brooding adolescent poet with his venom of negativity reminds one of Ginsberg’s *Howl*. It is no surprise then that the poet goes on to identify himself with the wolf, known for being both ferocious and untameable. But MacSweeney’s wolf is informed by the notions of Shelley and Victor Hugo as mentioned as epigraphs of “Brother Wolf”. While Shelley considers the wolf a savage, Hugo credits the wolf for teaching man to disregard slavery and endure hunger and live without any shelter in the wood.

The other image that recurs in his poetry is that of Orpheus, known for his gifted musical ability that enabled him to pursue his beloved all the way down to Hades. MacSweeney’s association with the little magazine and small press poetry, better known as the underground poetry, gives currency to the Hades allusion. His alignment with the subversive voices of the “underground” is also made obvious through a rodent imagery in “Brother Wolf”: “Underneath, the mole that shook hands with english poetry” (24). The initial letter of English poetry is subverted through a lack of capitalisation in order to distinguish it from mainstream poetry. The mole’s location in the underground also signals an alternative type of poetry. But the imagery is much more convoluted than this might initially suggest. In course of the poem, the rodent is depicted as metamorphosed mullets, the shoal of small fish that was “munching” the mistaken heart of Shelley as “english poetry” or using Chatterton’s body as stairs. The fish imagery allows MacSweeney to play with the idea of the food-chain in which exploitation becomes synonymous with consumption. Thus mullets come to stand for the exploiter/publisher, consumer/reader and self/poetic-Other. On the surface, “Brother Wolf” is about the death of Chatterton. But a close

analysis of the poem reveals a series of transformations, not only of the poetic figure but also of death as an event. As already mentioned, MacSweeney's identification with Chatterton is caused by an extreme self-abjection. His memory of being rejected remained raw in him which is evident in many of his poems.

In "Brother Wolf" MacSweeney is "infected" by death, but with a sudden apprehension of the materiality of existence. His rendering of Shelley's death, which he deftly parallels with that of Chatterton's, can serve as an example:

Or  
 Shelley's heart which later turned out to be  
 Liver  
 & the fish had a whale of a time munching  
 english poetry. (24)

Legend has it that during his cremation the heart of Shelley remained intact even though all other body parts were burnt to ashes. According to Clive Bush, MacSweeney adjusts the legend to contend that it was not actually heart, but liver, that escaped the funeral pyre after Shelley's death at sea. The "liver" alludes to the self-generating organ of Prometheus that kept growing back despite being eaten up everyday by the vultures of Zeus in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (323). By referring to the generative aspect of liver, MacSweeney is apprehending life itself and testifying to its materiality. This allows him to reciprocate the joke of the consumers of Shelley's heart who think that by munching on Shelley's heart they have managed to extinguish his indomitable spirit. Also it contributes to one of the major themes of the poem: misrecognition. The mistaken identity of the organ is a consolation for the poet. The fishes think that they have the heart (i.e. the spirit/ the life) of Shelley at their disposal while in actuality they have the liver. Similarly, the publishers and their consumers, i.e. the readers, are subject to a wrong assumption. So they continue to relish poetry of a mistaken identity and of a lower order too: "english poetry" with a lower case. In MacSweeney's mockery, the mistake becomes larger than the actual death of the poet. Perhaps this is an attestation to the belief that poets cannot die; they simply transform from one base of energy to another. A poet then is a shape-shifter like the Crow in Ted Hughes's poetry. MacSweeney expands the idea further by making the poet's body not of any individual but of many individuals. The carcasses are thrown at the face of the

establishment as a form of defiance. Hence "Chatterton arrives and breaks things up/With his Meteoric tithe" (24).

Ironically, MacSweeney's reading of the misrecognition is ambiguous. Chatterton did not drown like Shelley, but that is how MacSweeney re-members the event from the glimpse of truth he had in his visionary experience. In such a vision, the body of Shelley becomes the body of Chatterton, and in turn, the body of "english poetry." The "munching" suggests a ritual devouring of the body of poetry, and by extension, of the poets. The shoal of small fish like mullet can have a "whale of a time" from their participation in such communal consumption. The pun on hell, on the other hand, complicates the meaning of the image by indicating a demonic process that is outside the whale, or rather canonicity. In Christianity, the body of Christ is symbolically eaten as food (bread) as a constant reminder of the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ. For MacSweeney, who ended his Chatterton Ode, "Wolf Tongue," claiming: "I eat no Latin bread" (72), this ritualistic consumption has a different connotation that does not necessarily conform to the canon. According to Clive Bush, the "mullet" can also mean "a star of more than five straight points." Bush maintains that the mullet image sparks a "vampiric aristocratic codification of the poet's dead body" (322). This devilish devouring of the body can be linked to cannibalism that features ever so prominently in anthropological shamanism. In that case, the cannibalistic consumption of the body explores the "memory theatre" of the western psyche. In *Colonialism and the Western Mind*, Michael Taussig trenchantly points out that cannibalism is the culmination point of western fear of the Other.<sup>1</sup> Here, MacSweeney presents his self as the Other, truncated from the "Self" because of his experience as a victim of exploitation, and projects a long drawn out self-mutilation to ritually mark his own

<sup>1</sup> Michael Taussig in his *Shamanism*, insists that cannibalism in the Indian community is "hinged on a drawn-out, ritualised death in which every body part took its place embellished in a memory-theatre of vengeances paid and repaid, honours upheld denigrated, territories distinguished in a feast of difference... [For the white men] Cannibalism summed up all that was perceived as grotesquely different about the Indian as well as providing for the colonists the allegory of colonization itself. In condemning cannibalism, the colonists were in deep complicity with it. Otherness was not dealt with here by simple negation, a quick finishing off" (105).

territory as a poet and also to unleash energy as a shaman. In short, the mutation of the corporeal self is a ritualistic violation of the body to impose a “feast of difference” on other bodies.<sup>2</sup>

Then again, in “Brother Wolf,” MacSweeney structures the “Self” as “Other” with reference to characters like Shelley, Chatterton, Orpheus and Wolf. However, the correlation between MacSweeney and these other characters is not a straightforward one. The sense of abjection that he feels because of his memory of exploitation leads him to indulge in a *jouissance* in which the poetic self seeks and loses his own ego to forge a heterogeneous “I.” As Julia Kristeva puts it, “in *jouissance* where the object of desire...bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other...the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (1982 9). MacSweeney admits to a similar process in his explanation of the alienated space as “local.” By local he referred to a way of “taking a language outside of the ego, the self, one’s own personal relationships, and suddenly realising all that land is out there.” (*Poetry Information* 30). The local land in “Brother Wolf,” however is infested with exploiters and backstabbers.

That is why it is possible to trace the existence of MacSweeney’s self from which the loaded image of the mullet has taken off only to become a star. The small fish like the mullet interpreted as a star can be related to the success of MacSweeney’s publisher after he managed to dupe the budding poet. In his interview with Eric Mottram, MacSweeney mentions that the person who was responsible for exploiting him became a director of Hutchinson because of the profit he made through his campaign for the young poet’s candidature for the Oxford Chair (22). However, the personal reference is disguised, which is typical of MacSweeney. As Robert Sheppard points out, MacSweeney’s poems are “dense in private meaning,” which tends to exclude readers from the “province of meaning” (1999 13). One possible explanation for such protective self-referentiality could be MacSweeney’s disinterestedness in soliciting sympathy from his audience/reader. Like

<sup>2</sup> For an insightful analysis of this image, see William Rowe’s *Three Lyric Poets: Lee Harwood, Chris Torrance, Barry MacSweeney*.

Catling, he displays his self-disfigurement without actually invoking pity. He becomes the producer and consumer, actor and audience of his own “memory theatre.”

Another personal reference in the poem would be his encounter with fellow poets that shaped him as Orpheus. Out of the ten-day Sparty Lea Festival, he envisions the trees to be dancing by themselves. In MacSweeney’s use the dancing trees are not examples of pathetic fallacy or projections of lyrical selves onto nature; they are an act of being and becoming. The gathering of the poets and their rhythm become nature. Such congregations do not require conjuring of mythical Orpheus for making the trees dance, because in its participatory moment the artist becomes the art; he himself has become Orpheus, his fellow poet, and the trees—all rolled into one:

At Sparty Lea the trees don’t want Orpheus  
to invoke any music  
they dance by themselves....  
The trees dance by themselves. (25)

In Greek myth, Orpheus helped Jason and the Argonauts to pass by the island of the Sirens by creating a song of his own. Thus the Orphic song becomes an alternative to the lures of conventional poems that demand submission to meaning. The location of the Orphic dance outside the known publishing hub is a celebration of the emerging alternatives — the British Poetry Revival (BPR) for that matter.

This participation in life is in contrast to the rest of the poem which seems heavy with death impulses. At times, MacSweeney even seems “morbid” with his overemphasis on death. In *Book of Demons*, he even considers going “Down into the pit,” entering the realm of death to find out about the “black cunning” that forces him to miss “the aim” by influencing his “soft heart” and “the plastic spine.” He ironically jibes “the kingdom of light” of death, and assuring death that he will not deviate from his desire of knowing, “the aim.”<sup>3</sup> But there is more to

<sup>3</sup> There are some Christian sects such as the Basilidans, the Docetate and the Marcionite who do not believe that Jesus was put on the cross. Even the accounts of Barabas suggest that Jesus was replaced before the crucifixion. *The Holy Qur’an* also attests to this version: “That they said (in boast): “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah.” But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no

MacSweeney than these death drives. Responding to Eric Mottram's query about the alleged morbidity in his poems, MacSweeney's response was, "I have to write to be alive" (32). MacSweeney does not fetishise death. Instead he uses it to test the materiality of life through language. As William Rowe rightly points out, the suicidal tendency of the poet's allegorical figure Chatterton in *Odes* is "a self-destruction but also a rebellious act that preserves life against deadness," in which the poet, in Mottram's phrase, is "the vitalizer of language."

Kristeva in her discussion on abjection has shown how bodily disfigurements and excreta can serve as a reminder of life itself. Kristeva puts it:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theatre, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There I am at the border of my condition as a living being. (1982 3)

Analogously, MacSweeney allows his lyrical self to become an object of total abjection that is conditioned by a sudden apprehension of the materiality of his existence. MacSweeney makes death constantly transform within the nexus of the poem as if to dislocate death from its symbolic context and to grasp its materiality. The image of bones is a case in point. Both the metamorphosis of the fish into a rodent and Chatterton's physical death and transformation into a dead body are suggestive of spatial dislocations. It soon appears that the sea is unable to consume Chatterton's body, and the idea of the bones being thrown all over the estuary is actually an impossible scenario as far as MacSweeney is concerned;

....You can't expect advice from someone you eat then criticize for having bones because he

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(certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. And there is none of the people of the book (Jews and Christians) but must believe in him (Jesus) before his death; and on the Day of Judgment he (Jesus) will be a witness against them." 4:156-159. Web.

wants to keep his body in shape & and not spread it around all over the estuary (and poetry)

Why Chatterton lived in the hills (24-25)

The bones of Chatterton are not symbolic; they are real because Chatterton did not die any imaginative death. Such factual reference places the reader who fishes for meaning alone in a very difficult position of stomaching the bones of a dead poet. The invocation of the past is prompted by an uneasy sense of guilt. It makes a mockery of the way Chatterton was treated by returning the laugh back to where it came from. In this reconstructed rendering, Chatterton is no longer an inhabitant of the sea, but of the hills. It refers back to the first section of the poem, where the sea is burning, but it cannot harm Chatterton because his boat has moved inland. MacSweeney makes use of a cliché in order to get to the expected metaphorical boat journey required for the transportation of the souls to the after world, echoing the Orphic myth all over again in which Orpheus's song had the magical power to convince the underworld boatman Charon.

This joke spills over to the next image when we get to an implicit allusion to the Crucifixion. According to one version of Crucifixion, the body of Christ was removed by God and replaced by another to save his messenger from the actual process of killing.<sup>4</sup> The Christian theme becomes stronger with further reference to the Holy Grail through Wagner's opera of Parsifal. Wagner identifies Parsifal in one Arabic legend, Fal-Parsi (pure fool) to explain as to why he failed to recognise the Holy Grail even after seeing it. Non-recognition is thus established as a theme of the poem that contributes to the non-recognition of a poet-genius like Chatterton. The lack of sights features earlier in the poem when the "eyeballs melted in the cup" (24). This is a strange Shakespearean mix of a pitiable King Lear who (metaphorically) lost sight and a Hamlet contemplating a fight. Indeed, eyeballing or engaging on a head-on confrontation is a

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<sup>4</sup> In Coleridge's poem the albatross appears after the ship was alternatively exposed to the extreme heat in the Equator and then the extreme cold in South Pole. The temporary insanity of the mariner that led him to the killing, rather violation, of the albatross, can be attributed to this exposure to extreme heat and cold. Similar opposition features in "Kubla Khan" when the cave of ice and the sunny dome signal a war.

possibility, but it is meaningless because Chatterton has moved to a higher place and become an “illustrious sage,” like the Brahmin saints who used to go to the Himalayas for their meditations. So in his meaningless death, he has seemingly become an embodiment of meaning. Thus in the next section, where the dancing poets celebrate the Sparty Lea festival, “there they/ strap two/ rams together the/ hardest-headed/ wins. Death/ on the horns” (25). The battering rams become the dancing trees, and once again we are posed with the inseparability of death and life.

Such transformations are recurrent patterns of the poem in which binaries like foolishness/wisdom, stillness/movement, (horizontal) sea/ (vertical) hill, material/immaterial, meaning/meaninglessness, sight/blindness, knowledge/ignorance create an internal dynamics that keeps the signifiers away from assuming stable signification. This constant movement of ideas across the text turn the body into a non-body; a ghostly apparition: “strange/ tenancy for ghosts/ of universal disfigurement.” Chatterton/the poet has left the corporeal, which is fragile and illusory as is hinted at by the crystal, to get married to the fire. For a moment, “marrying the fire” appears highly religious because of its connotation of ritualistic consumption and the colour symbolism used in the succeeding line. The meteoric green light that emanates from this union is holy in a Sophist sense. I think the image involves a crude erotic possibility as well that refers back to the green table in Rimbaud’s poem attended by the Cabaret waitress. The marriage with fire is also a reminder of the sexual union with the demon as is the case in the Faust legend.

In *Elegy for January* also MacSweeney uses the metaphor of the meteor to describe Chatterton. The meteor can also stand for Parsifal’s spear that had the power to heal, but like the foolish knight the poet does not know it yet. So although we have cannibalistic devouring of the body, we do not get any sense of shamanic healing. As a result, the fire imagery tends to signify lust, a ritual based on eroticism and sexuality. There is a black humour with the whole idea of the poet’s marriage, the height of which is the allusion of Ann Hathaway, Shakespeare’s wife. She seems to be an enactment of running-away and living as a different self. The last aspect is captured by a crude pun on Hathaway (had-a-way) to suggest a lewd act. MacSweeney thus throws a pub-language to mar the canonicity (suggested by the allusion to Shakespeare) and

makes it a material of his poetry.

The de-composition and re-composition of the body is at the heart of MacSweeney’s handling of Chatterton’s death. In another Romantic echo, the Coleridgean opposition of ice and the sun in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is used to bring out a sacrificial creature in the like of the Albatross, Chatterton.<sup>5</sup> The killing of the albatross, which was initially hailed as a Christian soul, becomes a symbol of crucifixion. But in the case of “Brother Wolf”, we have seen how the symbolic possibility is avoided by making crucifixion a signifier. Finally the pun in the last line, Clive Bush observes, shows how Chatterton influenced the Romantics revolutionising of poetic language. Hence “Meteoric tithe,” for Bush, mean “metric tenth,” referring to the ten-line pattern used in the Rowley Poems, which was a complete break from existing norms (322). However, the pun on “tithe” allows us to connect this idea with the bites of Chatterton/Wolf or simply to an attack that came from an unexpected distant corner, especially because the “unknown” Chatterton was compared to a meteor in *Elegy for January*. Indeed, the energy of MacSweeney’s poems resides in the loaded language. Robert Sheppard’s observation on “Wing Odes” is pertinent here. In his *Far Language*, Sheppard writes, “by squeezing metaphoric language into the indeterminacy MacSweeney has ensured that the poems stay poetic” (14).

Thus within the context of the poem, the poetic body has been scattered so many times that it can only be identified as a ghost. It is a ghost inflicted with “one unflinching hurt.” But as ghosts, without body, the injury (hurt) can only refer to memory. Again there is multiplicity of meaning. The absence of physicality makes the bodily hurt immaterial for the ghost. Yet it does not negate the injury that was inflicted on the body. The death of Chatterton is not without meaning. He paid the price for rebelling against the system. The Hamlet

<sup>5</sup> The reference to Eliot’s poem “The Hippopotamus” is not out of place because it comes from the phase of Eliot in which he was seeing humans in sub-human and non-human terms. “Brother Wolf” as an animal poem, at least according to its title, finds a logical connection with the poem but subverts it. “Flesh and Blood is weak and frail/Susceptible to nervous shock;/While the True Church can never fail/For it is based upon a rock.” *The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, (London, Faber, 1990 [1972]), p.51.

image of striking a match gives currency to the ghost imagery. The ghost, for MacSweeney, is a way of handling the past. It is a return to the past but not representing it in flesh, rather in spirit. In other words, it is the energy of the past that is the material for the present. Bush thinks “Cine-cameras/trickling” refers to Jean Cocteau’s film *Orphee* and his journey to the underworld as the problem for the poet is “to reclaim the language of myth away from the sadomasochistic exhibition of godfigures for the more life-oriented world offered by poets” (Bush 323). MacSweeney thus *détourmes* religious symbols through a conscious or semiconscious reference to forgotten or half-forgotten religious or quasi-religious events. The Holy Trinity thus becomes the “cheesy triumvirate of ghosts” and God becomes a “stoned” projection of mind: “The stone of the mind was god/ and god/ the Stone” (WT 29). The parody of Christianity and crucifixion is the kind of *détournement* that Guy Debord talks about in his *Society of the Spectacle*. MacSweeney does not stop there. He manipulates a pseudo-religious figure like St. Valentine to qualify the self’s relationship with its other. Love for St. Valentine is both a canonical event and a cultural production; it is personal and public at the same time. It involves both the interior and the exterior. Similarly, MacSweeney’s love for Chatterton is a brotherly love for a body that is located outside the realm of sanctity, and logic does not come up with a didactic end to the ongoing textual tension. The priest can only promise the existence of God (“He”) on the other side of the shore. The immaterial poet (he) who has seen god in Stone ignores the priestly call decides to “bike home.” The memory of the feast of mullet comes to the foreground, and the dismembered body remembers to find back its body to make his lonely journey on a bike. Biking is a physical act that brings the poet (Chatterton included) from the realm of metaphysical and gives him the physical motion. Then again biking home alone is a retreat. It is a failure, a fall. But it is also a refusal to go to the sea or to the other side. In a bathetic tone, the case of sea sickness is mentioned for not riding the sea, and choosing the bike instead.

Sickness as well as bodily fragmentation is one of the aspects of abjection in Kristeva’s view, which causes the self to lose its sense of boundaries. Faced with death or its materials, the self is at the border of its condition as a living being. It tries to transcend the border through hallucination and longs to meet the “I”. As Kristeva posits:

“Deprived of world, therefore, I *fall in a faint*. ... I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, it is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject” (3). The tone of such abjection becomes prominent in “Brother Wolf” in the Shelleyean fall image that captures the tone of depravity and the state of borderless:

High hearts  
are wrecked.  
They fall on the rocks and the rocks  
fall on them.  
Wrecked. (28-29)

But, unlike Shelley who falls upon the thorns of life and bleeds, the bleeding for Chatterton is real. The body is hurt, falling not upon the thorns but on the rocks of life. As William Rowe posits, the poem is not about “sustaining an ideal against a hostile world. That is not the narrative. The rocks are nature, they are not allegorical” (unpublished manuscript). The fall on such real rocks is designed to open up the wound. It is a geographical crack as is suggested by the rock. It creates tremor with its own after-shock. It is a psychological wreck, because of the falling of the hearts. The opposing layers of meaning clash with one another to expose the fault-line. The synecdoche of rock institutionalises the church as in Eliot’s poem “The Hippopotamus” or *The Waste Land*, but only to sabotage it. Where in Eliot’s “The Hippopotamus,” the weak and the frail find strength in the rock of church, in MacSweeney the rock is the surface against which the self crashes and bursts into fragments like the proverbial fall of Humpty Dumpty from the wall.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the consequent question: “What are you doing?” prompts an unrehearsed abrupt answer: “Telling you lies” (29). This sounds like a confession, but with lies as its basis and in absence of the priest, the possibility of absolution is deferred. It is a kind of disavowal, rhetorically known as apophasis, which digs its own hole in the discourse. The answer, just like the

<sup>6</sup> The reference to Eliot’s poem “The Hippopotamus” is not out of place because it comes from the phase of Eliot in which he was seeing humans in sub-human and non-human terms. “Brother Wolf” as an animal poem, at least according to its title, finds a logical connection with the poem but subverts it. “Flesh and Blood is weak and frail/Susceptible to nervous shock;/While the True Church can never fail/For it is based upon a rock.” *The Collected Poems of T.S. Eliot*, (London, Faber, 1990 [1972]), p.51.

accompanying question, becomes the purpose of the whole poem.

The investigation of Chatterton's life, we are told, is a narrative that is based on lies. But it has dovetailed with truths so many times, and we have failed to recognise them because of our own value attachment and subjective knowledge. The idea of value strikes a chord in us as readers when gold is mentioned as an alchemic healing. Chatterton died because he failed to live a normal life like everyone else. He did not get the job of a ship's mate because he did not know enough geography and mathematics. His archival skills and penmanship were not enough to earn him a loaf of bread. He had to take arsenic instead. The cause of Chatterton's death is ultimately poverty, which is made explicit through the vocabulary from Economics that is used in the poem: "fund", "means of acquiring," "competence" "affords."

The whole of Chatterton's life presents a fund of useful instruction to young persons of brilliant and lively talents, and affords a strong dissuasive against that impetuosity of expectation, and those delusive hopes of success, founded upon the consciousness of genius and merit, which lead them to neglect the ordinary means of acquiring competence and independence. (30)

According to Rowe, MacSweeney is citing from George Gregory's "Life of Thomas Chatterton" (1789) that was reprinted as an introductory essay in Southey's edition of *The Works of Thomas Chatterton*. But by putting the biography as a script to give a self-account before the Stony god, the established knowledge about Chatterton is forced to lose its desired truthfulness. It generates new signifiers as a *détournement*. Guy Debord, in his Situationist International (SI) manifesto, posits that citations do not have to be plagiarism; they can be a way to make meaning progress by freeing it from its frozen archived status. The poem thus moves from abjection to subversion, which makes Maggie O'Sullivan acknowledge "the spit of dissent and the edgy, wounded anger of revolt" in MacSweeney (Rowe u.p).

Interestingly enough, the poem in its final conviction comes close to JH Prynne, to whom the poem is dedicated. In "A Note on Metal," Prynne talks about the evolution of coin from a metal, the history of metallurgy. In other words, he refers to metal before it assumes its exchange value. As in

Prynne, it takes a shamanic flight to get a real glimpse of the truth beyond the structures imposed by capitalism. So when Chatterton is picked up at the end of the poem by a giant magnet in the Sky ("the great sky magnet/ drew/ him/ Up"), we realise that MacSweeney is ultimately detaching the poet from the exchange value and taking him out of the earthly realm where his exchange value is no longer valid, and where his possibilities are endless like the limitless sky. But the end of the poem reflects on the bait that both MacSweeney and his alter ego look like Bull Trout, and allowed themselves to become the "rare catch." The epiphanic moment is characterised as a flash of rubidium when Chatterton ate himself in reaction to the capitalist Ideal that has no human empathy: "It is an Ideal which is an idea/ like eating your best friend. Chatter-/ton ate himself in one brief *rubidium glow*" (32). The self consumption is like the mythical snake of Ouroboros that eats itself only to find strength and grow bigger and bigger just like the Milky Way. Hence the poets are lifted to the sky like the souls of a shaman in Eliade's myth.

Then again, the poet proved his metal through his attraction to the Sky Magnet. The magnet imagery poses the poet as a mineral, a meteoric object with core, namely iron while the process of lifting of the poet is technological or mechanical. Like most of MacSweeney's complex imagery, the great magnet reminds one of the absurd Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*, where a giant magnetic loadstone was used for the flying island to ascend or descend in order to colonise the inhabitants on the land. Then again it plays with the magnetic language of Rock music and the rise to stardom. MacSweeney thus depicts the sky as the ultimate state without boundary where all the identities converge to form the heteroglossic "I". Significantly the sky is without the god in his stone shape. Thus through a visionary exploration of the knowledge of death of Chatterton and others, MacSweeney comes to term with life. Chatterton gives him an occasion to experience the state without boundaries and connecting with other selves. This is the "memory theatre" of confronting the other, which makes "Brother Wolf" shamanic.

It is Chatterton's use of language that impressed MacSweeney the most. In *Elegy for January*, MacSweeney casually remarks that if Chatterton had not died young he would have become as boring and repetitive as Wordsworth. He credits the

way the Bristol based Chatterton reinvented the strength of northern dialects:

He was the first English poet with a really northern tongue to escape the Gallic feet of Chaucer, and that very much appealed to me. The language for me, because I'mused to it, is longer lasting, it's durable, it's harder, it's springier, it's more elemental, it comes out of all sorts of historical geographical and social complexity (33).

This language is in contrast to the Queen's English of which the south boasts. Indeed, MacSweeney is close to the Romantics in his admiration for genius and youth, his frustrations over tragic possibility, his Dionysian zeal and search for new experiences. Then again, he is willing to stretch the Romantic use of language and ideas further than the settled comfort of meaning. Chatterton gives him an occasion to tackle some of the ideas of the Romantics. Shelley's alpine Mont Blanc flows from the snowy heart of France to snowball in Sussex; Coleridge's idea of imagination as a wedding garment in "Dejection: An Ode" gets an ironic twist in: "May/your garment marry/the forest not/ knowing if/ or where the trees grow" (27). This last idea is phrased like a wedding blessing.

The nuance of MacSweeney's imagery extends the mythic and geographical possibilities of language setting new standards. His contemporary poets like Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, albeit working with similar materials, never actually took the risk of opening up so many layers of poetry. Like other shamanic poets, MacSweeney refuses to give any straightforward meaning to his poem. Notwithstanding the Movement poets, MacSweeney was reaching out to an eclectic range of sources. The metaphysical conceits are from the seventeenth century English tradition. The Romantic and Black Mountain influences on MacSweeney have already been mentioned. He also took interest in the French surrealists and the neo-Platonists. But he is not troubled by any Bloomian "anxiety of influence." Like Chatterton, he is not afraid to rewrite and intervene in the past. His lyrical self is like Walt Whitman's atoms that rebound on every other self; not to conform, but to violate the symbolic structure of the narrative that defines our present moment. Even the personal heroes that he conjures in his poems are not without scrutiny. Indeed, MacSweeney is not

separated either from the past or from his influences; he is in a chaotic dialogue with all the becomings. As Tony Lopez contends, "The heroes are names of power to be conjured and cursed in an ongoing rant" (87). I think Lopez sums up MacSweeney brilliantly in adding, "There is throughout a rage against inequality and the waste of life all about us, and none of it comes to reductive answers" (87)

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