‘I am Pearl’:
Guise and Excess in the Poetry of Barry MacSweeney

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Abstract

Barry MacSweeney was a prolific poet who embraced many poetic styles and forms. The defining characteristics of his work are its excess (for example, its depiction of extreme emotional states, its use of challenging forms, and the flagrancy with which it appropriates other writers and poems) and its quality of swerving (for example, the way it frustrates the reader's expectations, and its oppositional identification with literary antecedents and schools).

I argue that MacSweeney's poetic development constitutes a series of reactions to a moment of trauma that occurred in 1968, when a crisis in his personal life coincided with a disastrous publicity stunt for his first book. I chart MacSweeney's progress from 1968 to 1997 in terms of five stages of trauma adjustment, which account for the stylistic changes his poetry underwent. In Chapter One I consider the ways in which the traumatic episode in 1968 led to MacSweeney embracing the underground poetry scene. In Chapter Two I examine the ways in which his 1970s poetry exhibits denial. In Chapter Three I look at Jury Vet and the other angry, alienated poetry he wrote in the early 1980s. In Chapter Four I look at 1984's Ranter, an example of poetic bargaining in which MacSweeney alludes to mainstream poetry in return for what he hopes will be a wider readership. In Chapter Five I consider Hellhound Memos, the collection that resulted from a period of depression MacSweeney suffered 1985-1993. In Chapter Six I look at his most successful work, Pearl and The Book of Demons, in which he confronts and accepts the roots of his trauma.

Using a combination of close reading, literary theory and biographical research, I explicate and evaluate MacSweeney's development in terms of his literary and cultural contexts. While accounting for the various styles and approaches MacSweeney undertook, this study shows his oeuvre to be remarkably consistent in its structure, imagery and poetic techniques.
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*Bibliography*
I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the funding that enabled me to undertake this thesis; Newcastle University and the family of Barry MacSweeney for the use of the Barry MacSweeney Papers; my tutor Professor W.N. Herbert; Andrew Duncan, Terry Kelly, Peter Riley and especially Jackie Litherland for granting interviews and/or sharing their collections of MacSweeney papers with me; and my partner Rachael for all her encouragement and support.
List of Abbreviations

Texts by Barry MacSweeney

**Cabaret**
*The Boy From The Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother* (London: Hutchinson, 1968)

**Boulevard**

**Just 22**
‘Just Twenty Two – And I Don’t Mind Dying’ in *Wolf Tongue* pp.20-23 [first publ. as *Just 22 and I Don’t Mind Dyin’: The Official Poetical Biography of Jim Morrison, Rock Idol, Curiously Strong*, 1971]

**Memos**

**Demons**

**South East Arts Review**

Archive Material

Archive: BM: 1/...
Material from the ‘published’ Barry MacSweeney Papers, Robinson Library Special Collection, Newcastle University.

Archive: BM: 2/...
Material from the ‘unpublished’ Barry MacSweeney Papers, Robinson Library Special Collection, Newcastle University.

Archive: Boxes 1-30
Correspondence, review clippings and miscellaneous material from the Barry MacSweeney papers, Robinson Library Special Collection, Newcastle University.

Secondary Texts

**Poetry Information**
Unpublished texts

Jackie Litherland interview  An interview by the author.

Terry Kelly interview  An interview by the author.

Duncan/MacSweeney interview  A three-day interview undertaken in 1996 by Andrew Duncan. Most of the tapes were later accidentally destroyed. Only the first two tapes remain. I have used a transcript of the interview, provided by Andrew Duncan.

Barry MacSweeney reading  A transcript by the author of a tape recording of a reading given by MacSweeney, which includes lengthy introductions to the *Hellhound Memos*. 
Introduction

Principles

When Barry Patrick McSweeney published his first poems at the age of 17 in *Stand*, he did so under his birth name of 'McSweeney'. Every subsequent publication appeared under the variant spelling 'MacSweeney'. Mc/Mac is from the Gaelic for 'son of', and this initial qualification (it is not quite repudiation) of the Name of the Father was re-enacted compulsively by MacSweeney in his poetry, which is full of part-identifications, appropriated identities, surrogate selves and self-applied names and titles. For more than thirty years, the emperor, rather than his new clothes, remained invisible; and in 'Sweeno, Sweeno', one of the highlights of MacSweeney's last major work *The Book of Demons*, the poet informs us that he is 'two people - at least'. Most of his readers have been happy to concur, interpreting the range and diversity of MacSweeney's oeuvre as a sign of a fundamental lack of continuity and coherence: here surely is a poet who pursues multiple lines of enquiry; a poet who writes in various modes for confused reasons; a poet who has lost his way. However, as I became more familiar with MacSweeney's work, I noticed motifs, symbols, image clusters and phrases that, although they appeared decades apart, bore a striking similarity. Might MacSweeney's restlessness - his drive to master more styles and incorporate more voices into his repertoire - have distracted readers from a consistent underlying symbolic system?

I began to conceive of MacSweeney's life's work as a series of reactions to a single moment of trauma. The trauma occurred in 1968, with the convergence of several events that MacSweeney related to his concern with fatherhood: the commercial success (but artistic failure) of his first book; the ridicule he suffered following a disastrous publicity stunt; and his girlfriend having an abortion. These events led to the writing of MacSweeney's first great poem, 'The Last Bud', which enacts the traumatic moment in the form of an encrypted image complex and by pairing up his main literary influences, Basil Bunting and Jeremy Prynne. This thesis offers a chronological account of how MacSweeney's career develops in the wake

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1 'Six Poems by Barry McSweeney', *Stand*, Vol 8, No 2 (1966) pp.6-9
2 'Mc' is simply a variant form of 'Mac'; however, MacSweeney may have held the widespread but erroneous opinion that one is Scottish and the other Irish.
3 'Sweeno, Sweeno', p.269
of the trauma, as he embraces experimental poetics, carrying forward the successful elements and rejecting the rest.

In my early chapters I refer to Bloom’s theories on poetic influence, and in my later chapters I make use of Kristeva’s theories on the link between depression and the compulsion to write poems. However, I have not attempted a purely theoretical approach, for I wanted to consider the impact of the social and literary contexts in which MacSweeney worked: Bloom and Kristeva tend to denigrate these aspects of a writer’s life. To this end, I include a brief biographical sketch with each chapter. I am aware that biographical interest and speculation has often dominated the reception of this poet. I am also aware that, despite his complaints about critics focusing on his sociological significance, MacSweeney aided this process. Nevertheless, MacSweeney’s self-mythologising demands some consideration of how he uses biographical detail in his work, and I have focussed on the ways in which he transforms details of his private life in his art.

MacSweeney is a poet of excess, and his finest moments occur when his poetry is all but overwhelmed by musical effects, by emotion, by allusion or by circumstantial details. One of MacSweeney’s most distinctive characteristics is the alert, speedy responsiveness of his poetry: as soon as he became aware of a new voice, style or subject, he would appropriate it. This appetite for the new was not matched by an ability to digest it: MacSweeney invariably mis-reads and re-writes his models, often improving them in the process. Another, related characteristic is the quality of swerving that we can observe in many of his successful poems, which invoke antecedents only to swerve away from them, and raise the reader’s expectations only to frustrate them. Together, these characteristics led MacSweeney to continually adopt different styles, tones and techniques throughout his career. Many of these proved to be blind alleys, but MacSweeney was an accretive writer, and the diversity of his earlier work pays huge dividends in his later, more achieved work, which synthesises many of his earlier discoveries.

MacSweeney’s unusual trajectory was not simply a product of his having followed the wiles of his inspiration: often, he can be seen imposing targets and changes of direction on himself. His was a polemical, polarising imagination and each new phase of his work typically rejects whatever has preceded it in favour of something stylistically different. Recognising this led me to suspect that motifs or structures that recur unchanged over time
must be of particular interest: presumably, their recurrence must mean that MacSweeney was not conscious of them, and that they were driving his work on a deeper, subconscious level. Therefore, throughout this thesis, I have paid particular attention to the three motifs that recur in all of MacSweeney's major poems: the presence of two antithetical literary fathers; the use of 'the quest' as a structuring technique; and the cluster of associations and images that surrounds the abortion in 1968. I will now say a little about these three motifs.

The 'two fathers' motif first appears in 'The Last Bud', in which the poet rejects Basil Bunting as a possible mentor in favour of Jeremy Prynne. Throughout the 70s and 80s, MacSweeney will take up and discard several paternal duos, including: Chatterton and Prynne in Brother Wolf; Michael McClure and Prynne in Odes; Mottram and Pickard in Black Torch; and Ken Smith and Basil Bunting in Ranter. MacSweeney had a distant, difficult relationship with his own father, so we would expect him to collect father figures; but he is unusual in choosing two antithetical figures, and in the length of time he holds to the position of apprentice. Bunting was the most dominant of MacSweeney's literary fathers: having rejected him in 'The Last Bud', MacSweeney casts about for a replacement, before belatedly confronting him in Ranter and Pearl.

The first instance of the 'two fathers' motif appears to have been the two men whom MacSweeney credits with introducing him to poetry: Pastor Cook (a Baptist preacher in Allendale) and Norman Gedling (a grammar school art teacher and Communist). As I discuss in Chapter One, these men correspond to the two contrary impulses that dominate MacSweeney's work: the rather self-righteous individualism of the Protestant who wishes to stand alone and convert the world, rewriting the literary canon and turning over the tables; and the collective endeavour of the Socialist, working as a union delegate and a journalist, who forms literary cliques and hopes for acceptance. The individualist impulse produced MacSweeney's best work; but he repeatedly allowed the collectivist impulse to dominate, leading to derivative, factitious poems. This is related to his rejection of the strong father (Bunting), in favour of weaker substitutes.

The second recurring motif in MacSweeney's oeuvre is the quest structure. In what I will argue are MacSweeney's best poems, 'The Last Bud', 'Wild Knitting', Pearl and Demons, the quest is for personal redemption. These poems exhibit a confident excess; the stakes are high, and MacSweeney allows his individualist, libertarian spirit to run free. A
redemptive quest is a quintessentially Protestant notion: salvation cannot be guaranteed by adherence to the rituals and traditions of a church; it must be earned by individual achievement. In what I will argue is work of secondary intensity, most markedly in *Black Torch*, 'Colonel B' and *Ranter*, the object of MacSweeney's quest is a readership: whether a small, hardcore readership in work such as *Odes*; or the wider, mainstream readership he hoped to reach with *Ranter*. We can connect this to the way, when writing well, MacSweeney would revise (and improve) his poems by adding lines, rather than taking lines away. When he tried to edit his work in the more traditional sense of removing bad lines, the results are fatal, for he didn’t 'edit' so much as attempt to direct, contain and control his poems; usually in order to make them adhere to a political or poetic system, or to tailor them for a specific readership. When MacSweeney courts an audience in this way, it is invariably the result of a crisis in confidence.

The third and final constant in MacSweeney's oeuvre is the cluster of images concerning young girls who have either been murdered or are in danger; with ancillary images of a Lancelot figure on horseback, which the poet associates with failed chivalry, sexual transgression, guilt and self-disgust — that is, with Vivienne Carlton's abortion. I have been able to partially explicate the rationale behind this complex, but ultimately the symbolism achieves authority through sheer persistence. There is a fearful stillness at the heart of MacSweeney's poetry that no amount of stylistic variation can quite cover up. This can be observed in the curious way MacSweeney's literary precursors never change: what Shelley meant to MacSweeney at the age of eighteen is much the same as what Shelley means to him thirty years later. Usually, the development of a poet’s writing is mirrored by their development as readers: consider the different ways in which Seamus Heaney alludes to Gerard Manley Hopkins in *Death of a Naturalist, North* and *Electric Light*. MacSweeney's method is to augment a precursor with an increasing number of masks and personae, so Shelley might be joined by other youthful poets such as Chatterton and Jim Morrison, or by other politically radical artists such as Kazimir Malevich or Vladimir Mayakovsky. Shelley's various facets are illuminated, but his underlying significance does not change. We can imagine MacSweeney's psyche as, if not Donald Davie's imaginary museum, then an imaginary hall of fame, the room gradually expanding as it fills with actors, poets and rock.

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4 Naturally, there are poems that function on both levels. *Just 22* is an example of a successful poem that aims at a form of personal redemption (the 60s notion of the 'freak out'), but that is also aimed at securing a smaller audience among the emerging avant-garde, while alienating most of the audience MacSweeney had reached with *Cabaret*. 
star heroes who never age or die; a frozen moment in which no sin can be forgiven because it has always just been committed: the glee in the act and the self-reproach afterwards co-exist, much as in Cocytus, Dante’s petrified figures suffer timelessly for their sins.

MacSweeney’s oppositional, questing poetry is not simply a product of personal pathology; nor can it be accounted for in terms of the frequently-invoked poets with whom he wished to be associated: Shelley, Chatterton, Prynne, Jim Morrison and Michael McClure. MacSweeney often alludes to these poets as secondary father-figures in an attempt to manipulate his reception; but poets do not choose the terms and conditions of their imaginative estate, and we do them a disservice by following the false trails they set. To switch metaphors, once MacSweeney’s allusive deadwood has been stripped away, the reader finds another layer of symbols and affinities, and seizing on this, we can touch the quick, living stuff underneath: much as in Dante’s wood of suicides, where to break a twig is to provoke the tree into painful, sappy, bloody life. Through a combination of close reading, tracing the poems’ sources in terms of biographical and literary contexts, and considering the wider social context (including issues of class and popular culture) in which MacSweeney wrote, I have endeavoured to read him out of one set of contexts and into another.

One of the contexts in which MacSweeney needs to be situated is the tradition of English Protestant dissent. I discuss this in detail in Chapter Four, as part of my consideration of Ranter and ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, but I will refer to it in passing many times elsewhere. The Reformation is often cited as the historical moment in which English culture was crystallised: England would be a conservative-Protestant, competitive-individualist, often militant nation with a monarchy – though always with an undercurrent of radical Socialist dissent. As we shall see, MacSweeney’s lifelong vacillation between individualist and collectivist poetry shows the extent to which he had internalised this dichotomy. However, there was an earlier historical moment that altered the terms for Northern England: William the Conqueror’s savage reprisal for the Northern uprising in 1069 (the ‘harrowing of the North’). William’s scorched-earth policy led to much of Northumbria being referred to as wastā est (waste land) in the Domesday Book. The cultural fall-out lasted centuries: the native culture was forced underground and went unrecorded. An oral tradition flourished (the border ballads), but the instability of the region precluded a sustained literary tradition. The North lagged behind England in education and industrial development for centuries, and only after the Reformation was the region considered ‘civilised’.
The region's literary and artistic roots had been severed, and there would be no great tradition of Northern artists or poets. This was a lack that Basil Bunting felt acutely, and with *Briggflatts*, he showed what a Northern artist with a sense of history could achieve, if he had ingenuity and took a synthetic approach to cultural identity. However, as we shall see, MacSweeney's relationship with Bunting was problematic (Bunting preferred MacSweeney's contemporary Tom Pickard; and since *Briggflatts* appeared in 1966, MacSweeney saw Bunting as much as a contemporary as a founding father). Bunting's methods, and his markers of cultural authenticity, came to influence MacSweeney only in his later work such as *Ranter* and *Pearl*. There is something perverse in MacSweeney's long avoidance of Bunting, for many of the challenges facing MacSweeney in the 60s and 70s were the same ones Bunting had met. Both poets found it necessary to confabulate a historical memory in order to fill a gap left by repression, and the reader must grasp this if they are to engage with their oppositional mapping of imaginary Northumbrian kingdoms, or with MacSweeney's insistence on unliterary, non-native poetic models from Black Mountain to the blues. Today, the historicising vision of Bunting and MacSweeney means that both poets are anathema to an English literary culture suffering a form of amnesia.

**The Structure of the Thesis**

Following its abortive birth, MacSweeney's poetic career corresponds closely to the five stages of trauma adjustment proposed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying*. The five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Kübler-Ross did not say that all five stages would be experienced, nor in the given order, but this is what we find in MacSweeney's case. I have used Kübler-Ross's divisions to chart MacSweeney's progress chapter by chapter, not because I wish to psychoanalyse the poet, but because the five stages account for the poetry's stylistic changes (despite its use of the same basic underlying structures). I will now offer a précis of each chapter.

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Chapter One begins by analysing the moment of trauma MacSweeney experienced in 1968, looking at the reasons for the commercial success of MacSweeney’s first book *Cabaret*, and the fallout from the publicity stunt that saw him nominated as Chair of Poetry at Oxford University. I examine the local and national literary context into which MacSweeney emerged: poetry was enjoying a bubble of popularity at this time, while simultaneously fragmenting into mutually exclusive movements (‘Balkanising’ in Eric Homberger’s phrase). The most significant movements for MacSweeney at this time were the Liverpool poets, the ‘official’ (Movement) poetry, the new enthusiasm for international poetry, and the emerging avant-garde. I also consider how MacSweeney’s introduction to poetry influenced his understanding of the poet’s role. The Baptist Preacher Pastor Cook’s Protestant dissent would lead MacSweeney towards a competitive, Bloomian understanding of poetry as individual achievement; whereas art teacher Norman Gedling’s definition of poetry was based on communal, collective, Socialist ideals. Throughout his life, MacSweeney continually switched between these viewpoints. I conclude by offering a reading of MacSweeney’s first great poem, ‘The Last Bud’, in the light of all these issues. Although MacSweeney will not write such a restrained, linear poem again until ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ in 1986, he carries forward the aforementioned three key motifs from this period.

Chapter Two considers the ways in which denial – MacSweeney’s initial reaction to the trauma – influenced his development throughout the 70s. During this period, MacSweeney redrew his criteria for success as a means of denying that the traumatic moment had occurred. Having rejected Basil Bunting, he tried to find other, more suitable literary fathers (in particular, Jeremy Prynne), and courted a small, hardcore readership rather than fame and mass acceptance. I also consider the role Eric Mottram played as editor of *Poetry Review* at this time. Mottram published some of MacSweeney’s poems, and MacSweeney was Chairman of the Poetry Society, which was then dominated by poets of the British Poetry Revival. From this period, MacSweeney carries forward the characteristic of swerving, and develops an oppositional attitude towards his readership, raising their expectations only to swerve away from them. He now sees it as his mission to challenge his readers, rather than appeal to them as he had in *Cabaret*; so although the work retains its autobiographical elements and symbolic system, its language and form is characterised by fragmentation and

collage. Another new development is his hero-worship of pop idols, which was already turning into a self-aggrandising self-portrait in *Odes*.

Chapter Three looks at the point in 1978 when MacSweeney made the switch from denial to anger: the second stage in his trauma adjustment. I summarise MacSweeney’s earlier political poetry, focusing on the Protestant-individualist/Socialist-collectivist dialectic that informed it. I then consider MacSweeney’s sudden adoption of collectivist historical narratives in *Black Torch*, and subsequent abandonment of them in favour of a more individualist myth in *Jury Vet*, a poem driven by a wish to offend and alienate the reader. I also consider the importance of journalism to MacSweeney’s development as a poet. MacSweeney habitually denigrated the importance of journalism to his poetry, but it provided him with several techniques and insights that proved invaluable to his development. These include the attention-grabbing headline quality of his work, the gap between title and text (derived from his practice of sub-editing), and his literary and political responsiveness. These qualities are demonstrated in *Jury Vet* and ‘Wild Knitting’: political poems that succeed because MacSweeney is able to harness his individualist impulse. With these poems, MacSweeney begins to use his inner turmoil as the subject of his work, and it is this impulse (rather than any stylistic trait) that MacSweeney carries forward from this period.

Chapter Four considers MacSweeney’s switch from anger to bargaining: the third stage in his trauma adjustment. After the delirious excess of *Jury Vet*, MacSweeney abruptly reins-in his poetry and produces his most carefully constructed poem to date: *Ranter*. I evaluate the extent to which *Ranter* is influenced by Ken Smith, and consider the extent to which *Ranter* was written in order to attract a new publisher and new readership, as MacSweeney incorporates more mainstream elements into his poetry in return for hoped-for acceptance. By tracing *Ranter*’s historical referents, I am able to evaluate the extent to which it differs from the Northumbrian kingdom Bunting constructed in *Briggflatts*. From this period, MacSweeney carries forward his return to Bunting as an antecedent, and his impulse to mythologise Northumberland: both elements reappear in more subtle forms in *Pearl*.

Chapter Five concentrates on MacSweeney’s seven-year period of depression: the fourth stage of his trauma adjustment, which followed *Ranter*’s rejection by major publishers. During this time, MacSweeney wrote nothing of value and published nothing. I consider Kristeva’s ideas on depression and its link to the compulsion to write poetry, and the
influence of blues music and mythology on the sequence with which MacSweeney broke his silence: *Memos*. Exploring some of Michael Taft’s ideas on the place of the individual blues artist in a collectivist tradition, I show how MacSweeney used the blues to resolve the dialectic that had hindered his work. *Memos* is a transitional work that displays signs of depression’s detrimental effect on MacSweeney’s confidence, but that also signals the direction his next work will take: the persona pursued by hellhounds through a contemporary cityscape looks forward to *Demons*; and the figure of the little girl looks forward to *Pearl*.

In Chapter Six, I look at *Pearl* and *The Book of Demons*, the collections with which MacSweeney reaches the final stage in his trauma adjustment: acceptance. Together, these sequences form a summative statement on the price of naming yourself a poet, and I show the various ways in which they synthesise and build on MacSweeney’s earlier discoveries. I continue to make use of Kristeva’s theories on depression and language acquisition in order to explicate Pearl’s symbolic functions, and to explore the way MacSweeney confronts his most significant father figures as part of his broader theme of self-appraisal. I show the way MacSweeney has moved from rejecting the female (in ‘The Last Bud’), objectifying her (in *Odes*), abusing her (in *Jury Vet*) and driving her away (in *Ranter* and ‘Finnbar’s Lament’) to depicting her with profound sympathy in the fictionalised portraits of Pearl and Jackie Litherland we find in *Pearl* and *Demons* respectively. Pearl’s maternal aspect represents the first appearance in MacSweeney’s poetry of a strong mother-figure. Prior to this, the mother has always been replaced by a second father figure. I also consider the collections’ treatment of politics and journalism, and offer a reading of both collections as quests for redemption that stand as the culmination of MacSweeney’s writing life.

**Contexts and Acknowledgments**

This thesis began when Denise Riley, my tutor at UEA, introduced me to MacSweeney’s work. The first poem I read was ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, an atypical poem in many ways, but it impressed me with its ambition, its emotional directness and the soaring music of its language. I could not imagine any other English poet having the nerve to adopt the persona of a fallen Celtic war chief and to speak through that mask so clearly, with no sign of the debilitating, embarrassed irony that seemed so pervasive. I was enthusiastic about the work,
and Riley said she would try to set up a meeting between MacSweeney and myself. A week later, she emailed me the news of his death. I felt frustrated that it had taken a chance personal contact for me to read this poetry, and it seemed there was a story to tell about this poet’s work: MacSweeney had been enormously popular for 15 minutes in the 60s; he had fought on the frontline of the poetry wars in the 70s; he had pointed the direction of a major strand of Linguistically Innovative Poetry in the 80s; he had been first to register the effects of Thatcherism in his poetry; and he had finally emerged from the Bloodaxe stable in the 90s with his most achieved work. Stranger still, the bizarre career trajectory of this near-invisible poet seemed to mirror developments in English poetry: we can make a few broad brushstrokes by mentioning the bubble of popularity in the 60s, the ‘Balkanised’ scene in the 70s, the barren stretch in the late 80s, and the post-division era that started in the 90s.7

When I embarked on the PhD, MacSweeney’s work had attracted very little critical attention. When John Wilkinson’s pioneering essay ‘A Single Striking Soviet! The Poetry of Barry MacSweeney’8 appeared in Angel Exhaust, much of MacSweeney’s work was out of print. Wilkinson’s essay was crucial in allowing me to navigate my way through MacSweeney’s earlier and mid-career work; it will remain a cornerstone text in MacSweeney studies. Andrew Duncan has written several illuminating essays and articles on MacSweeney, in particular ‘The mythical history of Northumbria; or feathered slave to unreasonable demands: Barry MacSweeney (1948-2000)’.9 Duncan also provided me with a transcription of the first two tapes of a three-day interview he undertook with MacSweeney in 1996 (the other tapes were accidentally destroyed: MacSweeney’s luck strikes again). In this interview, MacSweeney’s recollections of Pastor Cook and Norman Gedling were particularly useful to my thesis. Peter Barry’s account of the Poetry Society takeover in Poetry Wars10 helped place MacSweeney’s 70s poetry in context. The other pioneers are so few in number they can be

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7 ‘Post-division’ is one of the many terms used for the current climate in contemporary poetry, in which work that would have once been considered ‘avant-garde’ might appear from ‘mainstream’ publishers; and erstwhile hard-line small-press aficionados admit to liking John Burnside. It is too early to tell whether this will prove to be a lasting development. The fact that Denise Riley has been the name to drop for fifteen years has not led to a concomitant increase in the amount of dazzlingly beautiful, exquisitely intelligent poetry being written.


named here: Clive Bush, Douglas Clark, Matthew Jarvis, Marianne Morris and Harriet Tarlo. Above all, special mention is due to Jackie Litherland: no one has done more to keep MacSweeney’s work in public view. I thank her for granting me several interviews, and making available her private archive of MacSweeney papers and letters.

Unless otherwise stated, all citations are taken from *Wolf Tongue* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2002), a posthumously published volume of MacSweeney’s work that occupies a position somewhere between a selected and a collected works, and reprints in their entirety most of the collections under discussion in this thesis: *Brother Wolf, Odes, Jury Vet, Ranter, Pearl* and *The Book of Demons*. It also contains most of the single poems I discuss: ‘The Last Bud’, ‘Just Twenty Two And I Don’t Mind Dying’, ‘Wild Knitting’ and ‘Finnbar’s Lament’. Occasionally I cite uncollected work from *The Boy From The Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother, Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard, Black Torch*, or *Hellhound Memos*. Citations of uncollected work are taken from the original or earliest publication, and full details of the original publication of MacSweeney’s collections can be found in the Bibliography. The Barry MacSweeney Papers, which were donated to Newcastle University by the poet’s family in 2000, are an invaluable resource, and have enabled me to follow the poet’s drafting process; however, because I have focused on the published texts, especially the most widely published texts, I refer to few unpublished works. I found The Barry MacSweeney Room, in which the poet’s personal library of books, pamphlets, magazines and vinyl are kept, to be very useful. MacSweeney frequently dated and annotated the books he was reading, which makes it possible to chart his enthusiasms closely.

At each stage in the thesis, I was aware of conflicting responsibilities: MacSweeney’s self-mythologising demanded some consideration of biographical detail, and yet the autonomy of the work has to be respected; the insights offered by literary theory were invaluable, but I also wanted to engage with the extra-curricular models that the poems

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12 See www.dgdelynx.plus.com/lynx/lynx49.html [accessed 1.3.06], in which Clark gives a brief but suggestive analysis of the way MacSweeney builds up a world in his poetry.
themselves promote (such as Jim Morrison and Robert Johnson); I wanted to give some idea of the range of new elements that MacSweeney introduced to each stage in his poetic development, but for reasons of space my account could not hope to be comprehensive. Furthermore, as with any prolific, protean poet, MacSweeney's work is marked by false starts, moments of prolepsis, and the sudden reappearance of a style or motif that seemed to have been left far behind: along with the existence of the Barry MacSweeney Papers, this means that for every change in direction I detect, an example can be found to refute it. Nevertheless, by focusing on the poems in which MacSweeney adds new ingredients to the mix, I have been able to chart his developmental arc. Above all, I wish to present a coherent view of MacSweeney's work. Although MacSweeney ranged over many styles and forms, I believe that his oeuvre coheres, and that the challenge of reading him is to see how it coheres.
Chapter One: How to Disappear Completely: 1967 – 1972

‘When one hasn’t had a good father, it is necessary to invent one.’

In this chapter I consider the various facets of MacSweeney’s traumatic experience in 1968: the success of his first collection *The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother,* based largely on his nomination for the Oxford Chair of Poetry; the humiliation he experienced in the press as a result; and his girlfriend’s abortion. In MacSweeney’s mind, each of these events was connected with the issue of fatherhood, and I consider what would become a lifelong motif in his work: the two fathers. In an interview, MacSweeney claimed that he was introduced to two different kinds of poetry by two very different father-figures: Pastor Cook (a Baptist preacher) and Norman Gedling (an art teacher). I consider how these men relate to two opposing strands that run throughout his work: the individualist and the collectivist impulse. I conclude the chapter with a close reading of MacSweeney’s most successful early poem, ‘The Last Bud’, in which the ‘two fathers’ motif first appears.

Kicking a Sacred Cow Up the Arse

There is a difference between fame and celebrity. Fame tends to be related to a skill or a talent you possess; celebrity is often bestowed at random (e.g. you choose the winning Lotto numbers), or because of your sociological significance (e.g. you appear in an ITV documentary about chavs): what you are rather than what you can do. It can be difficult to distinguish between the two terms. For a few months in 1968, MacSweeney was a celebrity. The Barry MacSweeney Papers contains several boxes of newspapers cuttings, most collected in autumn 1968, when MacSweeney was nominated for the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford. MacSweeney was 19 years old, had three ‘O’ levels, and had never been to university; he later likened his Oxford Chair nomination to ‘kicking a sacred cow up the

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There was ‘unprecedented public interest’ in the contest: most newspapers ran features on the story and MacSweeney was interviewed by magazines such as *Queens*, *Honey* and *Penthouse*. Heady stuff: these were the very magazines that prior to this had provided him with images of unobtainable glamour. The *Penthouse* article is one of the most sympathetic hearings MacSweeney received during this time. In it, MacSweeney states the dangers of his situation cogently: ‘they’d prefer to have people believe I’m a provincial idiot made good’, and the article ends with this summary: ‘MacSweeney accepts all the publicity that comes his way philosophically. He wonders whether he is quite big enough to warrant it and knows that publicity alone can’t keep him alive... But it seems certain that he has enough talent to ensure that he doesn’t become the nine days’ wonder that people predict for him.’

Officially, two Oxford MAs had nominated MacSweeney, but the unnamed dons had been paid to do so by MacSweeney’s publisher (Hutchinson) as a publicity stunt for MacSweeney’s forthcoming book. As such, it worked: *Cabaret* sold 11,000 copies. MacSweeney was the first candidate to be nominated for the Chair, which meant Hutchinson could say that, unless other candidates were forthcoming, the position would automatically go to MacSweeney. In fact, real contenders for the position traditionally waited until near the deadline before putting themselves forward. In the event, Roy Fuller got the job with over 350 votes. Second came Enid Starkie (the favourite) and third came Yevgeny Yevtushenko. MacSweeney received two votes. He had been manipulated, ridiculed and rejected and the consequences would be far reaching. Writing of the incident in MacSweeney’s obituary, Gordon Burn summed up: ‘It was a scam, of course. A publicity stunt. But it was a less celebrity-fixated culture then, and MacSweeney wasn’t wise to the ways of the world, and didn’t see the train until it hit him. He got burned.’ MacSweeney himself leads us towards this point of view:

I was never really told what the poetry chair was about; it was the glory for me. It sounds bloody simple. ... What do you expect me to do? I’m 16, 17, from a working class background, that has no literary connections, that knows nothing about the

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3 *Poetry Information*, p.24
5 See Archive: Box 30.
7 Or so MacSweeney claimed in *Poetry Information*, p.24
8 Gordon Burn, ‘Message in a Bottle’, *Guardian*, 1.6.00
outside world really. We lived in a close community on a housing estate. I didn’t know what the hell was going on.⁹

MacSweeney is being a little disingenuous. In a *Telegraph* article¹⁰, Anne Steele writes ‘[MacSweeney and I] met in a café in Great Portland Street... he pushed the tomato ketchup bottle away before the photographer arrived murmuring “I don’t want a working class image.”’ In another article, he complains ‘I’ve been filmed five times for television now, and every time they’ve put me in a slum setting. They think I’m a working class wonder boy’, and he frequently informs journalists that his publicity photograph shows his image superimposed onto a slum setting (the slum was not even Newcastle, but the Isle of Dogs).

MacSweeney realised how he was being presented, but did not withdraw from the process altogether: the promise of a readership was too tempting. Eventually, the *Sunday Times* ran two articles in which MacSweeney was reported as saying that Shakespeare was ‘a waste of time’ and that ‘I tried hash, pot and grass. The result is I have the Newcastle police watching my house right now. But you don’t need that stuff to write poetry – poetry has nothing to do with the mind’.¹¹ Irksome as these fabricated quotes surely were, MacSweeney’s claim that they were responsible for his failure to get the post is ridiculous: ‘[the *Sunday Times* article] has ruined my chances. Quite a few MAs were enthusiastic about my nomination, but after reading that, the Oxford people won’t want to know about me’.¹² MacSweeney was never really in contention; nevertheless, when the *New Statesman* ran an article asking various Oxford dons about their position on the nominations, Kingsley Amis was happy to cite the *Sunday Times* article: ‘For the first time, I think, we have anti-candidates at this election, people put up because it would be fun, or annoying, or radical-destructive to have a Professor of Poetry who is a trendy hippie of no achievements... All this is trivial and tiresome.’¹³ Amis goes on to say that he will vote for Fuller, the eventual winner. Lucie-Smith knows why:

Poetry has begun to play a part in the class war and the generation war. One reason why the contest for the chair of poetry at Oxford was so bitter was that these issues were involved. [...] The academic world was being challenged and grew splenetic at the prospect.¹⁴

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⁹ *Poetry Information*, p.25  
¹⁰ Archive: Box 28/29. Anne Steele, ‘Never mind who’s going to be professor – what IS poetry?’ *Daily Telegraph*, 30.10.68  
¹³ Archive: 28/29. *New Statesman* (undated clipping)  
¹⁴ ‘British Poetry Now’
Although sympathetic, Lucie-Smith is equally eager to promote MacSweeney as a 'working class wonder boy': he stresses that MacSweeney, having worked as a gardener, was currently unemployed; but does not mention the fact that MacSweeney was a trained journalist. Lucie-Smith, who also features in the *New Statesman* article, says that he will refuse to vote, out of disgust.

Jackie Litherland says: 'MacSweeney felt ridiculed... They trashed him. He was just a kid. He found it very difficult to get published after that. He was seen as a 60s fashion victim.'\(^{15}\) Nicholas Johnson states it baldly: 'It took half a lifetime for his reputation to recover.'\(^{16}\) A sense of exile and a siege-mentality never really left MacSweeney, but as I hope to show, this exile was largely self-imposed, and signalled a change in attitude towards his audience. The debacle over his nomination for the Oxford Chair gave rise to MacSweeney's lifelong attempt to control how he was perceived and a jaundiced view of the poetry world. He returned to work as a local journalist so that he would never be financially dependent on the academy or the literary world; and he started to develop a poetics of opposition, referencing popular culture figures such as Jim Morrison to confirm his anti-academic credentials while using fragmented forms designed to alienate the 11,000 people who bought his first book.

**Early Influences: *The Boy From the Green Cabaret Tells of His Mother* (1968)**

In this section, I will consider how MacSweeney was introduced to poetry; the literary contexts into which he emerged; and the extent to which *Cabaret*, although undoubtedly a product of influence-flooded apprenticeship, contains signs of the poet's future direction.

Throughout his career, MacSweeney enacted his conflicting feelings about his father by positioning himself between two antithetical literary father figures. By doing so, he could simultaneously create an appreciative father who would recognise his talents, and an antagonistic father whom he could offend. This was not a conscious strategy, and its

\(^{15}\) Jackie Litherland quoted in Gordon Burn.

\(^{16}\) Nicholas Johnson, 'Barry MacSweeney: an Appreciation', *Independent*, 30.5.00
persistence suggests it occupied a central position in MacSweeney's psychic life. In an interview with Andrew Duncan, MacSweeney tells two stories about how he was introduced to poetry; first by a hellfire Baptist preacher and later by a Communist art teacher. These two fathers correspond to a dialectic that runs through all of MacSweeney's work, between individualist, heroic poetry and Socialist, collectivist poetry. This dialectic manifests itself in many ways, particularly in MacSweeney's uncertainty about the kind of relationship he wanted with his readers. In the 70s, he wrote self-consciously experimental poetry because he had a specific, small, hardcore audience in mind: we recognise the personality-cult aspect of certain Baptist churches. In the 80s, MacSweeney wrote Ranter, an equally self-conscious appeal to a major publisher and a mass audience: we recognise the collectivist trying too hard to please.

MacSweeney claimed that his first encounter with poetry came when he heard the sermons of Baptist preacher Pastor Cook:

We used to go to St John's Chapel in South Northumberland where [Pastor Cook] preached hellfire, and to me – Pearl of course, she couldn't speak, bless her – to me it was firewater, it was the Living Word, and it was only ten years later that I discovered Milton and Bunyan and Blake and I understood what he meant, which was basic reality and truth. And Pearl understood but she couldn't speak. He talked about the weather the sky the darkness the stars and it meant everything to me. It really did. And I know it did to Pearl. And when I taught her to read and write she was able to say certain things. But the Pastor said that The Lord Jesus Christ Almighty was a person who had walked the earth and was not a distant star or a distant person. And I understood that. And it made me think that poetry, which I understood from the Bible anyway, from the Church, from a very early age, that it meant that it was a human thing, not a distant, far off prophesising thing. It was to do with human beings. When I saw Pasolini's film, 'The Gospel of Saint Matthew', when he turns the tables over, it's real. 'Cause that's what the Jesus Christ Almighty would have done. And if he'd been alive today he would have been a biker, he would have been a rocker. That's what the Bible's all about. And that's what turned me on to poetry. To those words in the high up lands 2000 feet up, said to 15 people and I was sitting there like a bairn with Pearl, just a bairn. And this man made... they were poems really, they were sermons but they were like poems. And he just said them out of the top of his head. And I thought: bloody hell's bells!17

Pastor Cook's sermonising accounts for the Protestant individualist aspect of MacSweeney's personality and poetry: the anti-institutional part of him that refuses to be subordinated to any system, even his own; the part that prefers individual achievement to trade union collectivity;

17 Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
the dissenting, self-righteous part that will contemptuously dismiss huge areas of the literary
canon; the part of him that expects poetry to confer redemption and salvation. This aspect
will lead MacSweeney to adopt ridiculous, indefensible attitudes, but will also lead to his best
poems in ´The Last Bud´, Jury Vet, ´Wild Knitting´, Pearl and Demons.

Some years later, MacSweeney’s grammar school art teacher Norman Gedling turned
him away from religion and introduced him to Communism and Russian poetry, after seeing
a religious picture MacSweeney had painted:

[...]

Gedling was responsible for MacSweeney’s collectivist, unionist aspect: the part of him that
would organise a poetry festival; dedicate poems to his contemporaries; and later work as a
union delegate. This aspect will lead to many failed poems: MacSweeney’s best work is
characterised by libertarian excess; when he tries to force his poetry to adhere to a
programme, the results are disastrous. Not only do MacSweeney’s attempts at overtly
political poetry fail, but his susceptibility to literary influence can also be interpreted as a
form of frustrated sociability. This is particularly evident in MacSweeney’s first collection,
Cabaret: as John Wilkinson has remarked, the book ‘amounts to an anthology of the poetic
fashions of its time’. I will now consider the influence of international poetry, Liverpool
poetry and avant-garde poetry on Cabaret.

Gedling encouraged MacSweeney to buy Yevtushenko’s Selected Poems in June
1965, and the slim anthology Jazz Poems in July. MacSweeney has inscribed the title page of
Jazz Poems with a quote from Yevtushenko’s ‘Precocious Autobiography’:

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18 Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
the Poetry of Excess (Cambridge: Salt, 2007) p.78
20 Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Selected Poems, trans. Robin Milner-Gulland and Peter Levi, S. J. (Harmondsworth:
Penguin, 1962)
If the poet tries to split himself in two between the man and the poet, he will inevitably commit suicide as an artist......

Unfortunately there are many other poets who, when their life is no longer in keeping with their poetry, continue to write poetry, trying to pass themselves off as different from what they are. But it is only to themselves that what they write is poetry.  

We note the insistence on living out the all-consuming role of poet: it had to be dramatic; it had to be authentic. Yevtushenko was soon replaced by Andrei Voznesensky, a more formally innovative poet whose travels around the world had led him to absorb the influence of Whitman and even the Beats. Voznesensky was more of a name to conjure with; Yevtushenko was already a bit last-week:

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Bored with bad poetry
I'm off to Russia,
drink vodka with poets there

Ball-points and bayonets
are singular in Moscow!  
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Russian poetry represented an exotic alternative to English culture, but MacSweeney's precocious taste in his choice of influence is not matched by an ability to assimilate its poetics. The trope of wise-youth-uncorrupted-by-society was radical in post-Stalin Russia, but in England it was more likely to evoke the Liverpool poets. Most of MacSweeney's early attempts at emulating the Russians lead to grotesque attitudes. There are several celebrations of the overlooked everyday worker, or the ineffable spirit of Woman:

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i kissed you for the first time in the
middle of the Swing Bridge in between two counties in
order to spread the loveliness over as
much ground as possible
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Such attitudinising is characteristic of MacSweeney. In time, he will learn to stress the theatricality of such gestures, but here he asks us to accept it at face value. The effect is coy and infantile, and somewhat reminiscent of the Liverpool poets' assumption that

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21 MacSweeney cites this as a quote from Yevtushenko's 'Precocious Autobiography'. MacSweeney's emphasis.
22 'For Andrei Voznesensky, for her', p.13
23 'Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icy [sic] Hat', *Cabaret*, p.51

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sentimentality demonstrates lack of pretension (‘Truth to feeling is valued much higher than truth to language’24).

The referencing of international poetry was a characteristic of both popular and avant-garde poetry in the late 60s. The Liverpool Poets spoke of their dislike for the poetry taught in schools, and the ‘sudden revelation’ they experienced when they read Rimbaud and Baudelaire:

The point about such writers was that they were moving, not that they practised a particular style, or advocated a particular way of writing... The effect which a poem produces is more important than the poem itself. If one can usefully make such a distinction, the poem is no longer an artefact, or a commodity, but a service; it is an agent rather than an object. In French literature this tendency stretches a long way back – as far as Rimbaud and Baudelaire.25

If this sounds simple-minded, we should consider what Rimbaud meant to MacSweeney: ‘I was just searching around and in Thorne’s bookshop in the Haymarket in Newcastle and there was the famous book by Rimbaud with the great photograph on the cover of the original punk rocker, and I bought it... I thought, this is for me.'26 MacSweeney has dated this book Oct 9 1966. MacSweeney has underlined several lines that resemble his own later poetry: ‘the poet is truly a thief of fire’,27 ‘I am dedicated to a new torment’,28 ‘I could never throw love out of the window’,29 ‘In the great centres we will nurture the most cynical prostitution. We’ll massacre logical revolts’30 and ‘For sale anarchy for the masses; irrepressible satisfaction for rare connoisseurs; agonising death for the faithful and for lovers!’31 At the end there is a Rimbaud chronology in which MacSweeney has noted ‘died aged 37 years’, and underlined the date of Rimbaud’s death (10.11.91). As was the case with Yevtushenko, MacSweeney is initially attracted to Rimbaud because he symbolises youthful rebellion; appreciation of the work would follow on.

24 ‘British Poetry Now’.
26 Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
29 Rimbaud, ‘je ne pourrai jamais envoyer l’Amour par la fenetre’ p.44
30 Rimbaud, ‘aux centres nous alimentrons la plus cynique prostitution. Nous massacrerons les revoltés logiques’ in ‘Démocratie’, p.128
31 ‘A vendre l’anarchie pour les masses; la satisfaction irrepressible pour les amateurs superieurs; la mort atroce pour les fideles at les amants!’ in ‘Solde’, p.146

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In 1968, poetry was enjoying a bubble of popularity. An incredible number of poetry magazines sprang up. The Albert Hall 'happening' on June 11th 1965 was poetry's equivalent to Radio Caroline, bringing popular poetry with a strong North American influence to a wider audience. When poetry was mixed with rock music, it became possible for a poet to reach an audience of hundreds, sometimes thousands, at a single reading. Everyone from Jim Morrison and Bob Dylan to the Liverpool poets was doing it and, having won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize, Anne Sexton eschewed the usual round of seminars and university readings and formed a rock group, Her Kind, who performed interpretations of her poems. Sexton was quick to see the advantages of collaborating with musicians: '[Collaboration] opens up my poems in a new way, by involving them in the sound of rock music. ...people flock to Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, the Beatles – these are the popular poets of the English speaking world.' Eric Homberger offers this summary:

The literature of the decade partakes directly of the confusions of the society. In poetry there was a profusion of scenes, public readings, styles and poetics, translations, and hoop-la, which made for great excitement, but also for more enthusiasm than judgment in the editorial direction of publishing houses, and in the response of critics. [...] Poetry became a commodity, like toilet paper. The gap between academic verse and its opposite – call it 'naked' or whatever – became a permanent feature of the landscape, to the consequent impoverishment of both. There was no end to the cant, posturing, self-promotion, cabals and logrolling. It was, one supposes, the way things had always been, only more so. [...] Culture came to be Balkanized, with new 'scenes' emerging in Liverpool, Newcastle, New York, the Pacific North-West, and the Heartland of the Midwest. A new meaning was given to the cultural pluralism which was characteristic of the age. The intermingling of styles of life and styles of verse, begun in earnest in the 1950s with the Beats, spread rapidly throughout both countries. There was a lot of protest poetry, poems which sounded like song lyrics (and vice versa)... 

MacSweeney benefitted from this bubble of popularity, and claims to have once read for 4,000 people at Newcastle City Hall, supported by rock groups: '4,000 turn up at Newcastle City Hall to hear intermingling joysounds from local poets & rock groups (a cut of the door takings – those were the days!).' MacSweeney's popularity at this time derived largely from the fact that Cabaret presented him as Newcastle's answer to the Liverpool Poets. Later, having been dropped by Hutchinson, MacSweeney published Boulevard with

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32 Radio Caroline was a pirate radio station that began broadcasting on Easter Sunday 1964. It was soon averaging 22 million listeners.
35 *South East Arts Review*, p.38
the leading avant-garde press Fulcrum, but retained the blurb that proudly mentions his Liverpool connection. This suggests MacSweeney's abiding wish for the kind of mass popularity the Liverpool Poets enjoyed, despite his later protestations that he never liked their poetry.  

Several poems in *Cabaret* appear to be exercises in the one-trope-per-poem Liverpool style, for example 'Dr Zhivago, Love Poem', in which the persona displays a childlike naivety, being totally immersed in the moment, indifferent to social rules, and as affected as Brian Patten, who patented the style:

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I leapt into the aisle
hand out
ready to wipe her tears
before they fell
They arrested me for
tearing another
Cinemascope screen with intent
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As in the equally slight 'When Van Gogh', only the subject matter may give us pause: the worship of a screen idol is a theme to which MacSweeney will return, and Van Gogh is an early entrant to the Heroic Failure Hall of Fame:

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When Van Gogh
the brilliant mad
painter tramped through Paris
(sunflowers, O sunflowers!)
after quarrelling
with Gaugin,

and heard starlings
above Sacre Coeur,

it went in one ear and
stayed there
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36 See *Poetry Information*, where MacSweeney says: 'I knew one thing: that I didn't like what the Liverpool poets were doing. I knew that it was just too light', p.30
37 'Dr Zhivago, Love Poem', *Cabaret*, p.12
38 'When Van Gogh', *Cabaret*, p.12
Without wishing to burden this cartoon with undue respect, it may be significant that the eponymous hero is presented as quarrelling with his contemporaries. But in closing the poem with the familiar Liverpool trick of a rejuvenated cliché, MacSweeney again sets up an unfortunate discrepancy between the declared subject (which is individualistic) and the execution (which is derivative).

The influence of avant-garde poetries on MacSweeney’s early work proves equally overwhelming: ‘Such a Lot’ begins: ‘so much depends/ upon// my left hand on/ your right/ nipple...’39 Taste is being treated as a test of loyalty, a badge of allegiance, an ID card – but MacSweeney’s references are too obvious. What should be an admission pass marks MacSweeney out as an outsider: it’s not enough that MacSweeney should be influenced by W. C. Williams; he has to labour the point by referencing Williams’s most famous poem. MacSweeney disowned his early work for being derivative of Williams40 but it is much the same with the influence of Frank O’Hara. O’Hara’s poems address us familiarly but not intimately; the voice is sociable and witty, often appearing a little contemptuous of poetry’s slowness compared to an interesting conversation. By contrast, Cabaret is still spellbound by the well-made poem; in particular the lure of closure. He signs up to O’Hara’s manifesto, but what emerges is often pastiche:

a girl in hooped miniskirt leans against the white door
of the CLOTH MARKET CAFE
its 10.30 a.m. here are cabbages jewish
artichokes granny pippins & button mushrooms41

O’Hara’s lightness of touch and sprezzatura create an impression of an interesting, excitable person talking to you in real-time. There is none of this in MacSweeney’slaboured apprentice-work. The list of MacSweeney’s imitations can be extended: ‘A Letter, This Far Away, Tonight For Liberty’ mirrors Ed Dorn’s ‘A Letter, in the Meantime, Not to be Mailed Tonight’, ‘Death Go Get Yr Shoes Repaired & Mend Yr Icey [sic] Hat’ strongly evokes Ginsberg and e. e. cummings, and ‘We’ suggests that MacSweeney’s wish for simplicity of line stems from Robert Creeley.

39 ‘Such a Lot’, Cabaret, p.16
40 ‘My early poems are just complete and bad imitations of an echo I’d caught from Carlos Williams; they really are bad little lyrical-erotic stuff’. Poetry Information, p.30
41 ‘After Breakfast (With Peter) costing 5/6d’, Cabaret, p.49
For much of *Cabaret*, MacSweeney's collectivist aspect is in the ascendant: he is drowning in influences, a worshipper in search of a god. However, there are also signs of the individualism that will characterise the best of MacSweeney's 70s work. Among so many well-wrought imitations, the least successful poems are the most subversive. The reader may pause before 'The Decision, Finally (for Jeremy Prynne) 4am, March 24 Sparty Lea', a poem dedicated to, and an imitation of, J. H. Prynne. We note the use of indented lines and italics ('a resignation to the facts, which are these...') recalling *The White Stones*, in which italics are frequently used. But MacSweeney barely tries to match Prynne's teasing glissade of ever-deferred meaning, and the poem ends 'I am a minter of coins./Let's not forget that', suggesting that MacSweeney remains in thrall to more traditional, Romantic notions of the artist. Another Prynne imitation, 'The Temper', concludes:

...A star shines
over this place that went out two light
years ago, too many million lives ago, as we survive
in the path of
history.

Again, despite physically resembling a Prynne poem, the closing imagery of starlight has been grafted on – in this case, from the ending of *Briggflatts*. This could simply be an example of MacSweeney failing to digest Prynne's poetics, or it could be something more. This is arguably the poem that points out the swerving direction MacSweeney's 70s poetry will take: in *Odes*, MacSweeney will write lines that sound indistinguishable from Prynne, but he will do it in poems that physically resemble the work of Mike McClure. Harold Bloom would call this creative mis-reading a species of Clinamen, and I will consider his ideas in my discussion of 'The Last Bud', a poem which again finds MacSweeney choosing between Prynne and Bunting.

John Wilkinson suggests that the range and flagrancy of MacSweeney's ventriloquism show that he lacks the intimate relation with an audience that would enable more subtle references. MacSweeney's poetry is compromised by the need to ensure his readers 'get it':

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42 'The Decision, Finally (for Jeremy Prynne) 4am, March 24 Sparty Lea', *Cabaret*, p.45
43 Ibid.
44 'The Temper', *Cabaret*, p.40
45 Bloom, pp.19-45
MacSweeney's poems do not rise out of a productive milieu, but more from an extended epistolary network which leaves the poet relatively isolated except in the act of offering the poem; the density of cultural referents smells of the lonely room in which friends' suggestions for further reading are pursued...

On these terms, the eclecticism of MacSweeney's taste and his susceptibility to literary influence may result from his social individualism. This is one of the perils of the autodidact, who might easily become 'the ready warehouseman of letters, who knew exactly where to lay his hand on what he wanted, though the goods were not his own'. This was MacSweeney's dilemma: in a 1974 interview, Eric Mottram asked MacSweeney whether any of the other poets in the area (e.g. Tom Pickard, Basil Bunting or Tony Harrison) had warned him that the Oxford Chair stunt might backfire. MacSweeney replies 'They just didn't mention it. I think as far as they were concerned it was a big joke'. Later, while explaining why the Morden Tower never organised a magazine, MacSweeney describes the Newcastle scene as lacking in camaraderie: 'I think we were all jealous of each other actually. I think we were wary. We were your northern fucking tetchy young kids. We were feeling a little bit punky about each other.'

The Newcastle poetry scene was dominated by Stand magazine (then based in Fenham, Newcastle, and funded by Northern Arts) and the series of poetry readings held at Morden Tower, which was organised by Tom and Connie Pickard. Gordon Burn describes the scene:

...at Morden [sic] Tower we were exposed to mad riffers and homosexuals and junkies; to Ed Dorn, Robert Creeley and Alex Trochhi; to Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Ginsberg and other speakers of scary stuff we'd never heard before. ... It was for: the expression of immediate feeling and "visible truth"; the internal logic of sounds rather than imposed sense (letting it all hang out). It was against: careful, complex, ironic and well-finished work; the anecdotal and the small scale. I bought the donkey jacket; I wore the beard. But in MacSweeney's case, it changed his life. The isolation, the rejection, the gut-spilling, the torment and despair. He went the whole way.

46 Wilkinson, p.82
47 William Hazlitt said this of Coleridge. See 'My First Acquaintance With Poets' in Selected Writings (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) p.49. I appreciate the irony of quoting another man's mot juste on this subject. 48 Poetry Information, p.25
49 Ibid. p.26
50 Gordon Burn
MacSweeney did not try to play down the importance of Morden Tower in his poetic development:

In the space of I don't know how many weeks I saw Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Voznesensky, Yevtushenko and, bless him, Martin Bell. And it was an education that you couldn't get at a university. It was too good to be true, really, for a lad that was just a grammar school chap. There they all were. Ginsberg and Corso and Ferlinghetti just after they'd done their London gig. It was sensational. There I was just a bairn. And nobody could have a better poetic education than that. Nobody.\(^{51}\)

The success of Morden Tower inspired MacSweeney to establish an equivalent gathering. In the summer of 1967, MacSweeney invited a group of poets to stay in four cottages owned by his mother and grandparents for ten days. He called it 'The Sparty Lea Poetry Festival'. Sparty Lea is a tiny village in south Northumberland. MacSweeney spent part of his childhood there, and it is the setting for *Pearl*. The poets read their work, fished, made tapes and wrote. What else they got up to is a matter of speculation. Some of the key figures of what became known as the Cambridge school first met there. MacSweeney:

I'd just begun to meet other poets, besides poets in Newcastle. I'd met American poets – Duncan and Dorn and Ginsberg and Corso, through the [Morden] Tower. ... and I'd met Jeremy Prynne, Andrew Crozier, John Hall, Tim Longville, John James, Peter Riley, who I would class as the university poets, most of whom were under Jeremy Prynne's direct tuition at Cambridge. ... my life was just becoming incredibly bloody interesting. I was meeting all sorts of people who were telling me to read things, were doing things; there were readings to go to. ... There'd been the Albert Hall reading, which was a big communal gathering... and I'd met other people like Pete Brown, Spike Hawkins, through Stuart Montgomery... There was also THE ENGLISH INTELLIGENCER at the time: so there was already a kind of communal feeling...\(^{52}\)

Also in attendance were Connie Pickard, Pete Armstrong, Tim Longville and Nick Waite. According to MacSweeney, it proved to be a volatile mix:

There was a lot of hostility because John James was not a friend of Jeremy Prynne then, neither were Pete Armstrong and Nick Waite; they were yer actual working class lads from Somerset and Wales, who thought that Jeremy Prynne, Andrew Crozier, Peter Riley and John Temple were just a set of effete shits. There were numerous punch-ups – I had at least 3 punch-ups – I mean very physical punch-ups, with bottles and chairs. Nick Waite duffed up Andrew Crozier. There was a fight

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\(^{51}\) Duncan/MacSweeney interview

\(^{52}\) Poetry Information, p.28
between Tim Longville and Jeremy Prynne, as far as I remember. Tom Pickard drove his land-rover up Jeremy Prynne's boot... It was very difficult for me, because I knew them all and I liked them all as friends; that's what also created a lot of the tension for me.  

MacSweeney's account of the festival as a violent jamboree ensured that it acquired near-legendary status, and to this day it is periodically revisited in poetry magazine editorials or broadsheet columns. MacSweeney positions himself as both the quiet centre of a dynamic group and the outsider: not quite acceptable to mainstream tastes, but not entirely allied with an alternative movement. This accords so neatly with the 'lone wolf' persona MacSweeney promoted throughout his career that one must suspect its veracity. When the Sparty Lea Poetry Festival came up for debate on an online discussion forum, Peter Riley wrote the following in response to MacSweeney's account:

...Sparty Lea is being fictionalised. The appearance of Barry MacSweeney's old interview doesn't help either because half the information in it is complete fantasy.... MacSweeney is also a journalist and has the journalistic habit of puffing up events into sensations. He's wonderful, but he's not a reliable source of factual information, now or ever. This is particularly unfortunate as it gives authority to a version of the event which several people have already assumed on virtually no grounds. Sparty Lea was not a violent event. It was not riotous or out of control, there was very little hostility... Tom's tiff with Jeremy and pranging the car was the only physical aggression I remember... The evenings, prior to the last one when most people were too drunk, were quiet and orderly sessions in which people read their poems, were listened to with close attention in total silence, without, as I recall (and as usual) any actual discussion. ... The "hostility" Barry spoke of is greatly exaggerated and its class basis is nonsense. Nobody was a "university poet" as the term now applies. John James and co from Bristol were not working-class lads, they were mostly college lecturers or were soon going to be. John Temple and I were as much working-class as anyone there.

Riley also points out that the gathering was a meeting of the writers/subscribers to 'The English Intelligencer', so they already knew one another, even if they had not met: MacSweeney should not be credited with forming the group. Tom Pickard agrees that 'There was no violence'.

MacSweeney's tendency towards journalistic exaggeration may be irksome to the other festival-goers, but it is connected to the success of his 70s work, which depends on  

53 Ibid. p.29  
54 Peter Riley, 'Sparty Lea' British poets discussion forum (13.1.00) [no longer accessible]  
55 Ibid.
rewriting its literary antecedents and wilfully misreading the avant-garde aesthetic to which it claimed to adhere. MacSweeney saw fences where other men saw open fields. He could not proceed without confrontation born of a theatrical polarising of whatever the issue happened to be. What is beyond question is that MacSweeney's poetry benefited from being exposed to such various poets:

I'd never heard about "projective verse" before - for me it was like flinging language out beyond the self... not using sentences, breaking up, working with the breath... Some of the things had a bad effect on me - again you've got to take into account the social thing. I was very much in awe of people like Jeremy Prynne and Andrew Crozier because they had very powerful academic intellects. ... Up until then I didn't really know how I could write about politics, my geographical, historical and social heritage, background, history.56

The conflict between solidarity and individual achievement, stemming from his two introductions to poetry - Cook's Protestant dissent, and Gedling's Socialism - dominated MacSweeney's poetry and his life. Cook and Gedling were the first instance of what would become a crucial motif throughout MacSweeney's career: the two fathers. As we shall see, MacSweeney progressed by contraries, switching between styles to please or infuriate antagonistic father figures; in doing so, he created tremendous dialectic energy. The first time this happens is in MacSweeney's first great poem, 'The Last Bud', which plays off Basil Bunting against Jeremy Prynne.

Growing Up in Public: 'The Last Bud'

'The Last Bud' is MacSweeney's first assured success and the 'only poem from Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard that Barry really rated'.57 In this section I will consider this extraordinary poem in terms of its relation to MacSweeney's real and literary father figures. In brief, 'The Last Bud' is a reaction to MacSweeney's derivative early poetry, which failed because it was subsumed by its literary antecedents and influences; it is a sublimation of MacSweeney's

56 Poetry Information, p.30
57 Jackie Litherland, e mail to the author, 22.3.02. Jackie goes on to note that MacSweeney may have been influenced by John Wilkinson's review, which is dismissive of MacSweeney's other early work. This accords with the way MacSweeney did not single out 'The Last Bud' at the time as his best work; if he had, he surely would have cited it during the Oxford Chair debacle as the work upon which he wanted to be judged.
feelings about the Oxford Chair debacle, which was connected in MacSweeney’s mind to his mistreatment at the hands of his father;\textsuperscript{58} it is a prophecy of exile from a mainstream audience, an exile that was partly self-imposed and partly supervised by ‘mentor’ figures such as Prynne; and finally it is a rehearsal of the end of a relationship. Each of these factors was closely connected to the idea of fatherhood in MacSweeney’s mind.

I want to begin by looking at how MacSweeney encodes personal experience into the poem, weaving it into a historic and symbolic pattern. It is time to acknowledge MacSweeney’s willingness to direct the reader towards autobiographical readings. ‘The Last Bud’ is dedicated to MacSweeney’s then-girlfriend, Vivienne Carlton, an aspiring actress whose career followed a similar trajectory to MacSweeney’s: in 1968 she debuted as ‘sacrifice victim’ in a Hammer Horror film directed by Vernon Sewell: \textit{Curse of the Crimson Altar}. The film bombed and she never appeared in another. In a 1996 interview, MacSweeney refers to Carlton as a ‘great, great actress’, and ‘a movie star’, and claims ‘The Last Bud’ was written to make peace with her after a tiff they had after a poetry reading.\textsuperscript{59} The citation of autobiographical context is a hallmark of MacSweeney’s poetry and self-promotion, and yet biographical context is usually deprecated by MacSweeney’s academic critics. For example, in a fascinating and insightful essay on MacSweeney’s punk-influenced work of the early 80s, Marianne Morris begins by quoting Gillian Rose’s theory on denial stemming from a failure to mourn. Morris then says:

\begin{quote}
I don’t intend to limit the discussion of MacSweeney’s poems to the idea that they are failures in any way, due to the psychological nature of such an inquiry, which would need to take upon itself the burden of examining what has been lost, and what has not been mourned, by way of an investigation into the more personal areas of the poet’s life. This, in turn, would sensationalise and marginalise the work as the poetry of alcoholism or depression, for MacSweeney’s personal life was fraught with difficulties resulting from both, a fact already widely publicised and discussed under the guise of critical interpretation, and a fact that MacSweeney himself was happy to see publicised.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Cabaret}’s ventriloquism suggests MacSweeney wanted poetry to fill the gap left by his ‘absent’ father. When interviewed about the hostility and contempt with which the poetry world treated him in 1968, MacSweeney always stressed his youth and naivety, often stating his need for ‘nurturing’ and a ‘guiding hand’.

\textsuperscript{59} In his interview with Andrew Duncan, MacSweeney explains: ‘Viv went into a toilet at Charing Cross, when we were on the way back to Barnet, and took my entire congregation of poems and chucked them down the toilet... So I wrote ‘The Last Bud’ in Barnet when we lived together, and we made peace.’

\textsuperscript{60} Marianne Morris, ‘The Abused Become the Abusers’, \textit{Quid} 14 (October 2004) pages unnumbered
Understandably, Morris wants to have it both ways: the personal, psychological motives behind poems such as *Jury Vet* are so obvious that she must begin by explaining why she will not focus on them; a paradox deepened by the way her essay is couched in terms derived from psychoanalytical theory. But consideration of 'what has been lost, and what has not been mourned', will only 'sensationalise and marginalise' MacSweeney's poetry if MacSweeney's alcoholic depression is presupposed to be the answer. The usefulness of biographical context in explicating MacSweeney's work can be demonstrated if we ignore the poet's trail of breadcrumbs and take the image of un-mourned loss more literally: throughout MacSweeney's oeuvre we find a cluster of images and tropes that relate to an abortion MacSweeney's partner Vivienne Carlton had in the late 60s, shortly before 'The Last Bud' was written.

The child was to have been a girl, and they had decided on a name: Bonney. Soon after the child was aborted, MacSweeney's relationship with Carlton came to an end. This lost daughter, and failed relationship, haunted MacSweeney; coming to stand for all of the missed opportunities in his life. Towards the end of his life, he wrote many poems expressing regret for his childlessness, and *Pearl* is his most successful attempt at conveying the lost daughter as a psychic emblem. Breaking someone's heart, or having someone break yours, has a claim to being the founding experience of adulthood: MacSweeney's nostalgic wish to return to a pre-fallen state suggests a chronic dissatisfaction with how his life turned out rather than a lifelong attachment to Carlton. Likewise, Bonney formed the locus of an irresolvable cluster of associated emotions and images relating to MacSweeney's capacity for cruelty towards loved ones and his subsequent self-reproach.

The abortion is not the source of MacSweeney's conflicted behaviour; rather, it is an early manifestation of it that the poet came to see as a symbol or emblem. MacSweeney clearly wanted a loving, stable relationship, but feared becoming a father. This would lead him to embark on many volatile relationships and two short-lived marriages. If we see MacSweeney's lifelong acquisition and abandonment of poetic styles in terms of his claiming and rejecting literary fathers, we can also see it as a literary re-enactment of the abortion: MacSweeney was an ambitious poet, and yet for a long time his work remained dependent on other poets and texts. In MacSweeney's attitude towards his poetry we find the conflicted impulses of an uncommitted father: his fierce, defensive pride is matched by his contrary wish to disown the creation and move on to new conquests. Neither impulse achieved full
dominance, so MacSweeney remained in what must have often been a fraught state of limbo (albeit an artistically fruitful one).

The abortion – or rather, the 1968 trauma – is symbolically present in many ways in ‘The Last Bud’. The poem is full of painful transitions: most obviously, the speaker’s difficult entry into adulthood and poet-hood; but the theme of transition and emasculation is also present in the news of Britain’s entry into Europe, and the references to Britain’s vanishing Empire. At first, these appear to be circumstantial details, but they are actually early examples of MacSweeney’s tendency to conflate his inner turmoil and English politics (I discuss this in detail in my reading of Rant in Chapter Four). Likewise, the individualist/collectivist dialectic at the centre of MacSweeney’s polemical imagination is not simply an accident of his biography: he came to understand it in terms of the polarised post-Reformation English psyche, in which conservative-Puritan character and competitive-individualist politics remain locked in a fearful clinch with a dissenting, radical Socialist element. William Hazlitt referred to this psychodrama when he distinguished between the Englishman’s republican understanding and his royalist heart:

The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. The imagination is an exaggerating and exclusive faculty... The understanding is a dividing and measuring faculty.... The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. It aims at effect, it exists by contrast. It admits of no medium. It is everything by excess. It rises above the ordinary standard of sufferings and crimes. It presents a dazzling appearance. It shows its head turreted, crowned, and crested. Its front is gilt and blood-stained. Before it 'it carries noise, and behind it leaves tears.' It has its altars and its victims, sacrifices, human sacrifices. Kings, priests, nobles, are its train-bearers, tyrants and slaves its executioners. – ‘Carnage is my daughter.’ – Poetry is right royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right.61

Hazlitt suggests that political divisions within English culture announce themselves in terms of language and writing style: republican prose and Royalist poetry. This corresponds to the dichotomy in MacSweeney’s oeuvre between directed, collectivist, front-brain poetry and instinctual, excessive, libertarian poetry.

At this early stage, such a historical context may seem anachronistic, but MacSweeney increasingly came to understand the two contending impulses behind his poetry in terms derived from this defining moment for English identity, and his mature work will resound with the rhetoric of Bunyan and Winstanley. MacSweeney aspired to the role of a national poet, calling his poems 'State of the Nation bulletins' and lamenting 'the lapsed intelligence of the people of England'; but he was also haunted by the knowledge that his best work partook of a libertarian spirit quite at odds with his more traditional Socialist leanings; that there was something in his poetry that refused to adhere to his better judgment. When we describe MacSweeney as an oppositional poet, it is not simply because he so often opposes English literary culture, but because he contains the oppositions by which that culture was and is defined.

Because the abortion took place soon after the Oxford Chair incident, MacSweeney identifies with the aborted child: the sense of loss and wasted potential applies to himself and his career, which had also suffered an abortive birth. 'The Last Bud' begins with the speaker waking beside his loved one and deciding to leave her. The speaker's waking moments are described from the point of view of a newborn baby:

Your body rocking and heaving against
    me, a huge planet pulsating thunderously
    in my weak arms...
    ...knowing I hurt you much.  

Carlton's abortion is never explicitly mentioned; instead it is encrypted in the image of a failed Lancelot figure, usually on horseback. Traces of this image cluster can be found throughout MacSweeney's subsequent poetry, but the first time the images converge is in 'The Last Bud':

That dark
    continent of man has lived very well
since this ball of dust aborted itself
    from the sun's legs.

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62 See 'Colonel B', p.94 and 'Wild Knitting', p.138
63 'Strap Down in Snowville', p.266
64 'The Last Bud', p.15
65 Ibid., p.18
This planetary abortion is closely followed by:

...spurring my steed
    over fences of wicker and match...
My horse flounders, ditch water soaks my hair.

...Which street will I
    be walking in next time you hear me?
Wherever it is I will be doubled, into
day and night, crawling into one
for strength, slapping down one for
    glaring into my blue eyes.⁶⁶

Compare these lines with the following from ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’, written twenty five years later and spoken by Pearl (one of MacSweeney’s symbolic daughters):

...racing downhill, flung beside myself
with silence or groans into clart-filled ditches and drains.
Where is my fierce-eyed word warrior today? Slap with violence
all you wish night and day, my language Lancelot... ⁶⁷

The lines are remarkably similar: as well as making references to slapping, and to a double life by day and night, both speakers are racing out of control, both end up in the ditch, both ask a rhetorical question and both fall off their horse. So this is not just a ‘bad’ Lancelot, but a failed Lancelot. The horse’s traditional association with male sexuality would explain its position in an image-cluster concerned with post-abortion sexual guilt, but Pearl provides a further reason, when MacSweeney lets slip the name of Pearl’s horse: it was a mare called Bonny; which is as close to ‘Bonney’ as ‘McSweeney’ is to ‘MacSweeney’.

We find the same image cluster in several poems from Boulevard, i.e., in poems contemporaneous with ‘The Last Bud’ and written soon after the abortion:

My horse tires
and needs shoes
[...]
this story
is a bastard born, fatherless.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.19
⁶⁷ ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’, p.216
i am father to nothing,
especially that which bears my blood, my name. 68

An exhausted horse, bastardy, fatherlessness, blood, name. 'Letter to Vivienne' contains the following:

I wrote, it would be of great fortitude,
chiselled from gristle and cartilage, dragged
from the spur with slave's sweat, for
the marble calf...

[...] 
...picture this,
broad sword over the
temple of your body,
that rusting image.
soon, I shall write, legitimately, you
will be the fine-lined mother
of my children... 69

Key words such as 'spur', 'broad sword', 'rusting', and 'legitimately' now stand for the central image. In 'Six street songs' we find one of the few occasions when Bonney is named. Lancelot, sans horse, has now been downgraded to a page boy, though the Holy Grail reference keeps us on the right track:

I don't
know her, I call her Bonney.
[...] 
you
make me wait outside
like a page-boy
in a myth about the Holy Grail. I
love you in your
present state. Mallarmé writing a poem
at his son's death-bed. 70

Apart from 'The Last Bud', none of these poems were collected in Tempers of Hazard or Wolf Tongue, their suppression partly due to their uneven quality (most of Boulevard reads like an unsuccessful halfway house between Cabaret and Brother Wolf), and partly due to their almost Confessional habit of appealing directly to the reader.

69 'Letter to Vivienne', Boulevard, p.35
70 'Six Street Songs', Boulevard, p.96
If MacSweeney makes use of the same image complex in so many poems, why does 'The Last Bud' succeed where the others fail? I believe the answer lies in MacSweeney's combination of the highly personal (but encrypted) image complex and his concern with literary priority. Unlike the other products of MacSweeney's influence-flooded apprenticeship, 'The Last Bud' takes in-authenticity and the threat of being over-powered by one's forebears as its theme, and invites literary antecedents into its arena. As he had during the Sparty Lea festival, MacSweeney places himself in the centre of an impressive range of literary influences, and this confidence enables MacSweeney to move from being a precocious imitator to a creative (mis)reader of other poets. I will now consider 'The Last Bud' as a negotiation between MacSweeney and four antecedents (Roethke, Shelley, Bunting and Prynne), in terms derived from Harold Bloom.

In The Anxiety of Influence, Harold Bloom asserts that strong poets struggle with their antecedents, under an anxious Oedipal compulsion to replace them. Bloom writes:

> Every poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety. Poets' misinterpretations or poems are more drastic than critics' misinterpretations or criticism... There are no interpretations but only misinterpretations... Poetry (Romance) is a Family Romance. Poetry is the enchantment of incest, disciplined by resistance to that enchantment... A poem is a poet's melancholy at his lack of priority. 71

Bloom defines the weapons of choice in this struggle as Clinamen (misreading), Tesserae (antithetically completing the predecessor), Kenosis (an apparent self-deflation which is in fact a deflation of the predecessor), Daemonization (creating a Counter-Sublime in reaction to the precursor's Sublime), Askesis (self-purgation: a yielding-up of imaginative endowment that is in fact an attempt at truncating the precursor's endowment) and Apophrades (in which the precursor's characteristic work now appears to have been influenced by the later poet).

Clearly, many of Bloom's basic assumptions about poetic endeavour do not apply to MacSweeney, who enjoyed writing allusive poetry, who boasted about his thefts from admired poets, and whose anxiety concerned his reception rather than his imaginative endowment. Likewise, Bloom's commitment to canonical figures ('My concern is only with

71 Bloom, pp.95-96
strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors...’72) places him in an uneasy relation to MacSweeney, who tended to favour little-known poets, excluded or overlooked figures, or poets who had died before they could fulfil their potential. Nevertheless, MacSweeney’s obsession with father figures, and his oppositional or revisionary attitude towards many of his precursors is identifiably ‘Bloomian’. I use Bloom’s terminology when appropriate, but in general, I will prefer the less loaded term ‘swerving’. Without necessarily subscribing to Bloom’s theory of poetic anxiety, we will see that, throughout the 70s, MacSweeney requires a marker from which to swerve. Sometimes, this marker will be a literary precursor or an anterior poem; but on other occasions, MacSweeney will swerve away from his own declared intentions: his ‘biography’ of Jim Morrison contains no biographical information; and his ‘odes’ are not, technically speaking, odes at all.

I offer two main qualifications of Bloom’s theory. First, MacSweeney required not one father, but two. Bloom allows that some father figures may be composite figures, but that is not what I mean: MacSweeney thrived on the dialectical energy produced by placing two fathers in opposition to one another. Pastor Cook and Norman Gedling provided MacSweeney with a precedent for this in his life, and the first time he enacted this in a poem was ‘The Last Bud’, where he paired Bunting with Prynne. Second, Gedling’s collectivist concept of poetry made a huge contribution to MacSweeney’s career as journalist and union delegate, and his understanding of the role of a poet: MacSweeney engaged in publishing, promoting, organising readings, and was very active on his local poetry scenes throughout his life. Bloom ignores the aspects of literary influence that stem from a poet’s social network, but these were of particular importance to MacSweeney. To the extent that he expected poetry to be about collective endeavour, MacSweeney would not have felt the anxiety Bloom always associates with influence and priority. Bloom cannot conceive of a poet who delights in writing allusive, collectivist poetry, but MacSweeney emerged in 1968 and we should expect the radical Socialist optimism of the period to leave its mark:

‘The Last Bud’ employs many different kinds of allusion. I will examine the relatively straightforward way MacSweeney alludes to Theodore Roethke and Shelley, before considering the two most important surrogate literary fathers in ‘The Last Bud’: Basil Bunting and Jeremy Prynne. Allusions to Roethke suddenly flood the poem:

72 Ibid., p.5
... 'Love is not Love until Love’s vulnerable'.
Is this too close to the
heart for the telling? If so, reject it,
and cut yourselves deeply, for I’ll be gone,
and am deaf to windborn cries and sobs,
and there is one I know will sob.

That one lends me virtue, and I live
thereby; she knows the grammar of the
most important motion, the song in a flame.
'I came to love I came into my own'...

...So love is all I know, and that the dead are
tender. What I need is a puddle’s calm... 73

Beginning with a direct quote, these lines are a patchwork of borrowings from Roethke:
‘Love is not love until love’s vulnerable. [...] She knew the grammar of least motion, she/
Lent me one virtue, and I live thereby. [...] I sang within a flame./ ... I came to love I came
into my own’, 74 ‘I think the dead are tender. Shall we kiss? — 75 and ‘I need a puddle’s
calm’. 76 Roethke, at his most sentimental in the lines alluded to, represents ‘the very
innocence I have/ forgone and given up, and now hold from me’. The speaker suspects that
his emotional reactions are fraudulently over-determined by art and literature. Rather than
express this directly, MacSweeney enacts the dilemma with a tapestry of ironic imitation.

MacSweeney confirms that he is now a creative mis-reader of his antecedents in his
allusions to Shelley’s ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’, 77 a conversation poem that lists friends and
describes the poet’s surroundings:

...Next
Lie bills and calculations much perplexed,
With steam-boats, frigates, and machinery quaint
Traced over them in blue and yellow paint.
Then comes a range of mathematical
Instruments, for plans nautical and statical;
A heap of rosin, a queer broken glass
With ink in it; — a china cup... 78

73 'The Last Bud', pp.16-17
75 Ibid. 'She', p. 124
76 Ibid. 'What Can I Tell My Bones?', p. 165
77 John Wilkinson in 'A Single Striking Soviet!' notes the influence of 'Letter to Maria Gisborne', and
MacSweeney likens 'The Last Bud' to Shelley in an interview.
The objects are welcome reminders of Shelley’s absent friends and earlier enthusiasms, and Shelley sits in the centre of it all ‘like some weird Archimage’. Shelley’s friends are physically distant, but recalled with fondness. MacSweeney is more fundamentally isolated: his friends, although close to hand, cannot be trusted:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Once I had a friend} \\
\text{from my town. Now he is a fraud. Once} \\
\text{he was my golden calf, now warped by} \\
\text{that gilt-necked stream, he twists about} \\
\text{the stone, and chokes the living good.}^{79}
\end{align*}
\]

These lines recall MacSweeney’s description of the Newcastle poetry scene as wary and competitive. Typical of ‘The Last Bud’s portrayal of an unstable, antagonistic reality, a ‘friend’ becomes a ‘fraud’: the propinquity in spelling is enough to allow the sudden reversal. Where Shelley’s poem is an epistle with a single addressee, MacSweeney offers a ‘signed resignation’ addressed to whom it may concern.

MacSweeney’s most telling mis-reading of Shelley is his premature elegy for his father. MacSweeney is not the first son who wishes to bury his father, though few are so disarmingly plainspoken about it:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I have only one half of my parenthood.} \\
\text{The other isn’t dead, but he lingers on} \\
\text{this side of breath with the tenacity} \\
\text{of a rat. That breakdown in relations} \\
\text{doesn’t even bother me now.}^{80}
\end{align*}
\]

We might compare such candour with Shelley’s more conciliatory (if defensive) lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
[\text{We will}] \text{ask one week to make another week} \\
\text{As like its father, as I’m unlike mine,} \\
\text{Which is not his fault, as you may divine…}^{81}
\end{align*}
\]

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79 ‘The Last Bud’, p.15. These lines have been influenced by Canto 8 lines 30-66 of Inferno, in which Dante sees Filippo Argenti in the river Styx.
80 ‘The Last Bud’, p.16
81 Shelley, ‘Letter to Maria Gisborne’, p.370
Bloom would interpret MacSweeney's dismissal of the father as an indirect attempt to deprecate Shelley's importance, and by extension the importance of any other literary forebear present in the poem. On these terms, MacSweeney not only mis-reads Shelley's lines, he states that the father, while acknowledged (and thus not ceded the power he would assume were he to be repressed) is as good as dead.

MacSweeney's abiding wish for surrogate father-figures sprang, unsurprisingly, from the difficult relationship he had with his own father, who preferred MacSweeney's younger brother, Paul. Despite this, MacSweeney remained close to Paul, and sublimated his feelings of sibling rivalry and jealousy into his relationship with his literary contemporaries, particularly Tom Pickard. MacSweeney and Pickard received their first publication in the same issue of *Stand*, where they were declared the only good young poets in the North East. Ever since, the two have often been paired by critics, but their relationship was a difficult one because Basil Bunting named Pickard as his protégé, writing an effusive preface for Pickard's first collection ('I find here... a sound that suggests some of the earliest writers in the Greek Anthology'), and said nothing about MacSweeney's work.

We might have expected to encounter Basil Bunting as a literary father figure in 'The Last Bud': the leading older poet in the region, Bunting was also MacSweeney's boss at the *Evening Chronicle*; and he had even given MacSweeney feedback on some early poems. However, Bunting's allegiance was to Pickard, not MacSweeney, for it was Pickard who coaxed Bunting back into writing poetry in 1965. At this time, Pickard was seventeen years old, the same age Bunting had been when he left Peggy, the great mistake lamented in *Briggflatts*. Pickard was setting up home with his young wife Connie, and establishing a literary community centred on Morden Tower (i.e. a literary community that owed nothing to London). We can assume that this is exactly what Bunting wished he had done when he was seventeen, and this explains the enthusiasm with which the 65-year-old Bunting embraced the youthful literary scene associated with Morden Tower. Pickard's encouragement led directly to the writing of *Briggflatts*, which was launched at Morden Tower in December 1965.

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82 MacSweeney's later poems, particularly 'Daddy wants To Murder Me' also document regular beatings.
84 See 'The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney' in *Cabaret*, pages unnumbered
If the northern literary scene can be thought of as a family romance (and it can), then MacSweeney's place was painfully clear: once again he was the less favoured son. This must have aggravated MacSweeney's sense of injustice at his father's favouritism, and 'The Last Bud' enacts a turning-away from Bunting in favour of Jeremy Prynne, with whom Pickard had fallen out at the Sparty Lea poetry festival. To this end, MacSweeney makes no direct allusions to Bunting himself; instead, he alludes to Bunting's literary fathers, in a subtle but outrageous attempt to present himself as Bunting's equal. W. Jackson Bate describes this technique as 'the "leapfrog" use of the past for authority or psychological comfort: the leap over the parental - the principal immediate predecessors - to what Northrop Frye calls the "modal grandfather". The ancestors MacSweeney invokes are Alexander, Dante, Wordsworth and Whitman.

MacSweeney alludes indirectly to Alexander when he refers to Israfel: 'And her who is Israfel takes me to/ pity through pain... ' Israfel is the archangel who sounds the Resurrection Trump, once to destroy the world, once to begin the Resurrection. Israfel appears at the climax of Bunting's Briggflatts, in which Alexander reaches the mountain summit and sees

'lit feathers sweeping snow
and the limbs of Israfel,
trumpet in hand, intent on the east,
cheeks swollen to blow,
whose sigh is cirrus: Yet delay!
When will the signal come
to summon man to his clay?'

In Briggflatts, this moment signals an epiphany: Alexander sees the transience of his conquests: they will be superseded by the endeavours of others, and when Israfel finally sounds the trumpet, all will be erased. From this, Alexander understands that permanence is not to be found in the physical world, but in the spiritual. MacSweeney, engaged in a creative mis-reading of Bunting, reads an entirely negative futility into the image of Israfel. Bloom would call this process Daemonization: the act of creating a Counter-Sublime in reaction to the precursor's Sublime. MacSweeney eccentrically depicts Israfel as female (angels are

traditionally asexual) because he relates her to Carlton, and describes her as overseeing an apocalyptic abortion:

That is the indomitable
spirit of the backbone of centuries
that held down the dark skin of culture
in a manicured hand. That smelled of
talcum, that greased the stallion's back,
and pricked the elephant's flank.
That dubious imperial concern and greed
for guarding those less fortunate than
the hand holding the whip. That dark
continent of man has lived very well
since this ball of dust aborted itself
from the sun's legs. 87

The lines uncoil steadily, but the argument is paranoid and nihilistic; particularly since the imperialist hand that holds the whip is manicured and smells of talcum: a woman's hand, presumably Viv/Israfel's. Confronted with this vision of debased love, empire and exploitation, MacSweeney voices an alarming cynicism: 'Weary, I laugh at the staunch/proposal of further action.' To take action against the situation is to be duped: it is better to accept solitude and 'carry a/ burden no longer'. These lines are closely followed by the first instance of the Lancelot image I mentioned earlier:

... I leave for weariness of
staying the chase, of spurring my steed
over fences of wicker and match: crumpling
paper houses, trampling on almond eyed
children, bloodlusting pregnant mothers.
I came, I saw, I leave, leaving my sword to rust
by the dead charger. 88

Instead of indulging the fantasy of the rapacious, Alexander-like invader, going out into the world and proving himself like the young Bunting did in Briggflatts, the speaker turns his back and leaves: this turning away will become the central image of 'The Last Bud'.

87 'The Last Bud', p.18
88 Ibid., p.18
Dante's *Inferno* was crucial to the formation of the 'failed Lancelot' motif that took a central place in MacSweeney's symbolic system. In Canto 5, Dante and Virgil meet the lovers Paolo and Francesca, who explain why they have been damned for the sin of lust:

One day, to entertain ourselves, we read
Of Lancelot, whom love bound hand and foot.
We sat alone. There seemed no danger then.

Our eyes met many times as we read on.
The drama made us blush and then grow pale.
It was a single line that ruined us –

When we read how a long-desired smile
Was kissed by that great lover, then my own
True love – the one from whom I'll never part –

Reached out for me, and trembling, kissed my mouth.
The pander Galahad devised that book:
And we did no more reading on that day. 89

Paolo and Francesca are precursors of MacSweeney and Pearl who, as children, shared an equally innocent love, were brought together by the written word, and were subsequently damned to unhappiness. Paolo and Francesca also influence Bunting's depiction of his childhood love for Peggy, which likewise leads to his being 'damned' (though Bunting is punished because he abandons his love). 'The Last Bud' translates lines 13-15 from Canto 34, in which Dante describes figures locked in the ice of Cocytus, the frozen river at the lowest point in Hell. This is the circle of traitors, in which Satan torments Judas, Brutus and Caius:

Some lie at length and others stand
in it. This one upon his head, and
that one upright. Another like a bow
bent face to feet... 90

Here, MacSweeney has managed to smuggle in a glancing allusion to Wordsworth's lines from Book VII of *The Prelude*, in which the poet describes his residence in London:

A travelling cripple, by the trunk cut short,

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90 'The Last Bud', p.17
And stumping with his arms. In sailor's garb
Another lies at length, beside a range
Of written characters, with chalk inscribed
Upon the smooth flat stones. 91

Dante, Whitman and Wordsworth form a triumvirate for Bunting: they are his most
significant formative influences. 92 MacSweeney's allusion to Wordsworth's unremarkable
phrase ('another lies at length') is subtly, lovingly done: without announcing itself to a
general reader, it is a barb designed for Bunting. MacSweeney is identifying with
Wordsworth as a northern poet living in London. We can see that, at one level, MacSweeney
has written 'The Last Bud' expressly for his father figures: they are his primary readers. In
the 70s this tendency will frequently overpower his poetry, closing them off to a more
general reader.

Both Bunting and MacSweeney are drawn to Inferno's vision of implacable
retribution; unlike Purgatory, there is no hope of salvation here. I would connect this to the
way Bonney's significance does not develop throughout MacSweeney's oeuvre: he never
'gets closure' as we have learned to say. Throughout his career, whatever the ostensible
subject of a poem happens to be, if the associative web of images surrounding Bonney is
triggered, then the poem will detour into the same frozen moment of trauma first enacted by
'The Last Bud'. Only in his last major collections, Pearl and Demons, does he move out of
the inferno into a state of purgatory, in which his suffering begins to resolve itself.

Dante takes centre stage again in the closing lines of the first section of 'The Last
Bud':

...In the whirlpool, sleep takes over, the
boat bobs like a ball: this is the
lullaby of death. Friends and skeletons
hold hands in the marriage of evil.
There is no evidence.
Sterility asks how, and I answer from
the Gates of Dis... 93

(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) p.262. MacSweeney has annotated his copy of The Prelude, and has made
many notes to this Book.
93 'The Last Bud', p.17
These lines refer to various events in Cantos 7-9 of *Inferno*, in which Dante compares the dance-like movement of the Avaricious to Charybdis's whirlpool,⁹⁴ crosses the Styx in Phlegyas' boat, sees bodies beneath the muddy water, and finally reaches the Gates of Dis (the boundary to lower hell), where the gates are opened by an angel. These Cantos were crucial to Bunting. In *The Well of Lycopolis*, Bunting blends Dante's image of souls under the mud of the Styx with contemporary imagery of trench warfare in the First World War, translating lines 117-126 of Canto 7. He later confirmed that 'the whole passage of the Inferno is indelibly in my mind'.⁹⁵

Like the earlier references to Dante, Whitman's presence affects a tonal sea-change in the final section of 'The Last Bud':

I question the silent rain for answer,
and leave whichever well constructed house
we were in, from what thick carpet
I lifted my shoes. Which street will I
be walking in next time you hear me?⁹⁶

MacSweeney's rhetorical question recalls Ginsberg's question to Walt Whitman in 'A Supermarket in California': 'Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?';⁹⁷ as well as the lines from Whitman (also closing lines that sign off with a flourish) that inspired Ginsberg's poem:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.⁹⁸

MacSweeney is sending the reader to Ginsberg and Whitman in order to obscure the presence of his true antecedent, Bunting. The laying of a false allusive trail is another tendency that will come to overpower MacSweeney's 70s poetry.

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⁹⁴ See Dante, Canto 7, lines 22-24.
⁹⁶ 'The Last Bud', p.19
The final section of ‘The Last Bud’ contains more subtle allusions to Whitman’s ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’. Consider these lines, in which Whitman speaks in the persona of a shore bird to his mate:

Shine! shine! shine!
Pour down your warmth, great sun!
While we bask, we two together.

Two together!
Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
Day come white, or night come black...99

‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’ is the poem Bunting always cited when he praised Whitman,100 so MacSweeney makes sure to give an interpretative twist to Whitman’s lines. Where Whitman’s lines express a joyous love (the sea always symbolises an ecstatic union of the natural world and human society to Whitman101), MacSweeney expresses a stern resolution to turn his back on this world:

Enjoy the warmth, soak in
the lukewarm sea, wave your naked bodies
about like freedom flags. Ahead of me
is brilliant darkness...102

Here as elsewhere, ‘The Last Bud’ differs from Cabaret not in the density of allusion but in the allusions’ function. In this poem, MacSweeney turns his back on Bunting as a possible literary father, choosing Jeremy Prynne instead.

In an illuminating essay on The White Stones, James Keery qualifies Bloom’s theories by quoting St John’s ecstatic declaration that he is being absorbed by the greater being of Christ. Keery cites St John’s use of the image of the friend of the bridegroom, an image both Prynne and MacSweeney use:

101 Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ ends with similarly joyous lines in which the speaker wades into the sea: ‘I shake my white locks at the runaway sun/ I effuse my flesh in eddies and drift it in lacy jags’. See Whitman, p.124
102 ‘The Last Bud’, p.19
[St John's] insight into the process is expressed in Bloomian terms: 'He must increase, but I must decrease' (J3:30); and his extraordinary metaphor of 'the friend of the bridegroom' who 'rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice' (J3:29) is a sublimation of intense rivalry (as postulated by several scholars). In Psalms, to which St John the Baptist alludes, the trope of the 'bridegroom' occurs in a series of parallelisms, balanced by an explicitly competitive image (19:2-6): 'The heavens declare the glory of God ... In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.'

These biblical passages and images inform MacSweeney's lines:

[I] left behind last year's skin of commerce,  
which is a nice term for poetry and friendship.  
For water moves until it's purified, and  
the weak bridegroom strengthens in his bride.

At this time, MacSweeney was in the position of the friend of the bridegroom: 'I was very much in awe of people like Jeremy Prynne.' Peter Riley has spoken of a significant generation gap between poets of his generation (including Douglas Oliver, John James, Andrew Crozier, John Riley and John Temple) and the next (including John Wilkinson, Rod Mengham and Drew Milne). Speaking of his own generation, Riley explains 'we had more-or-less established the way we were going to write poetry before we were subjected to the powerful influence and personality of Jeremy Prynne, so that whatever effect he had on our senses, beliefs, attitudes, the effect on our poetry was comparatively weak...' By contrast, the subsequent generation of poets 'were directly influenced at a more formative stage, even actually taught by Prynne as students'. Riley continues:

MacSweeney falls between these categories. He was around very early, 1968, but a lot younger than everybody else. He was in contact with [Prynne] almost from the start. ... They remained in quite close contact for a long time, though the degree and terms of contact varied a lot -- there were several fall-outs as I recall. [...] Jeremy was immensely enthusiastic about the new in poetry and full of intellectual energy, and during The English Intelligencer period would enter into extended discussion with any poet who seemed promising. He was nobody's "mentor" at that time, and among the poets of his own age he was simply a very active and demanding member of a loose group association. Some poets, such as John James, were guarded about his potential to overwhelm, and would criticise his own poems back to him. “He

104 'The Last Bud', p.17  
105 Poetry Information, p.30
shouldn't be treated as a guru," [John James] once famously said. It was in the eyes of outsiders that he was a mentor or leader.\textsuperscript{106}

I disagree: in the eyes of MacSweeney he was surely a mentor. MacSweeney offered 'The Last Bud' to Prynne for his approval, and Prynne praised it as MacSweeney's finest poem to date.\textsuperscript{107} A more general appeal to Prynne is found in the body of the poem:

He is my friend, so
how will he take this, this testament,
established as he is, as I wanted to be,
to be sufficient in all ways, in that
durable fyre I was after too.\textsuperscript{108}

Here, the Chattertonesque 'durable fyre' is a reference to Prynne having introduced MacSweeney to Chatterton's work (in August 1967 Prynne gave MacSweeney the selection of Chatterton’s poetry which Prynne himself had read as an undergraduate: the first of many such gifts).\textsuperscript{109}

'Durable fyre' is also an allusion to Prynne's poem 'Love in the Air' which refers to 'the durable fire'.\textsuperscript{110} MacSweeney's punning on sentiment/sediment is also borrowed from 'Love In the Air' and there is a general tonal similarity between the two poems, which are both wry reflections on disloyalty. In order to demonstrate what attracted MacSweeney to Prynne's work, and also how the two poets differed, I will now offer a reading of the opening stanzas to 'Love in the Air'. The poem begins:

We are easily disloyal, again, and the light touch is so quickly for us, it does permit what each one would give in the royal use of that term. Given, settled and broken, under the day's sun: that's the pur-

\textsuperscript{106} Peter Riley, email to the author 28.11.05
\textsuperscript{107} Prynne's letter is dated 15/5/67. If this is the correct date, then MacSweeney must have sent Prynne an early draft of the poem. In a letter to his mother, MacSweeney dates 'The Last Bud' to September 1968, but claims to have been working on it for many months. See Archive: BM 1/2.
\textsuperscript{108} 'The Last Bud', p.15
\textsuperscript{110} J.H. Prynne 'Love in the Air', Poems (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1999) p.55. 'Love in the Air' also includes the line 'the owl of/ my right hand is ready for flight' which may have suggested MacSweeney's lines about the 'old owl' that flies from the oak after 'little, little mice'.
pose of the gleam from my eyes, cloud from the base of the spine. Whose silent watching was all spent, all foregone-the silver and wastage could have told you and allowed the touch to pass. Over the brow, over the lifting feature of how slant in the night.

That's how we are disloyal, without constancy to the little play and hurt in the soul. Being less than strict in our gaze; the day flickers and thins and contracts, oh yes and thus does get smaller, and smaller: the northern winter is an age for us and the owl of my right hand is ready for flight. I have already seen its beating search in the sky, hateful, I will not look. By our lights we stand to the sudden pleasure of how the colour is skimmed to the world, and our life does lie as a fallen and slanted thing."

'Love in the Air' is an examination of disloyalty in terms of various modes of being and doing. The reader might begin by noting that the poem's title omits the word 'is' from the phrase 'love is in the air'. Perhaps to make up for this lack, the poem includes several extraneous uses of the verb 'to do': for example, 'it does permit/ what each one would give', 'the day flickers and / ... thus does/ get smaller', and 'our/ life does lie as a fallen and slanted thing'. We note that this is not being done to fill out a metrical demand: in each case, the auxiliary verb forms an extraneous syllable that 'spoils' the metre. Many poems in The White Stones italicise participles of the verbs 'to do' and 'to be', in reference to the King James Bible, in which such italics denote a translators' interjection, necessary for grammatical sense but not strictly part of the text. This has given rise to conflicting interpretations of many Biblical passages, and Prynne is also interested in probing the area in which linguistic authority resides.

Prynne intends to sensitise the reader to linguistic subtleties we might ordinarily overlook. Reading the lines 'the gleam from my eyes, cloud from/ the base of the spine', we wonder why Prynne switches from the personal pronoun (my eyes) to the definite article (the spine), which usually carries overtones of the professional distance expected of a medical practitioner. In fact, Prynne uses many definite articles in the poem: 'the silver and wastage',

111 Prynne, p.55
‘the brow’, ‘the lifting feature’, ‘the little play and hurt in the soul’. These read like a bid to escape from the solipsistic lyric in favour of a less personal, more objective viewpoint. But the poem also admits that such linguistic precision can be simply disingenuous: ‘being less than strict in our gaze’ is a contrived way of admitting to having a roving eye.

The reader frequently has the sensation of having grasped an apparently direct, authoritative utterance, only to feel it slip through their fingers. Consider the lines ‘the owl of/ my right hand is ready for flight’. Prynne uses metaphor so rarely that the image seems to fly up from the page – but are we to take it at face-value as a sudden eruption of poetic language, akin to a sudden rush of emotion; or as a satirical swipe at such poetic language? Once again, we are thrown back upon our resources as a reader: we seem to have been addressed directly – and yet interpreting the tone and import of the lines proves difficult. Prynne strides on ahead, stepping confidently from word to word, while the reader progresses more slowly, growing increasingly sensitised to the indeterminacy of many key words, the exact meaning of which would depend on their historical moment and who says them, neither of which is entirely clear. Some of the more loaded words in this passage include: ‘disloyal’, ‘permit’, ‘given’, ‘settled’, ‘spent’, ‘contracts’ and ‘fallen’. Many poems in The White Stones consider concepts such as loyalty, constancy or quality in terms of chemical stability as well as moral/emotional dependability.

MacSweeney’s declaration ‘I am no chemist’112 is an example of Kenosis: it initially reads like a humble admission, and the poet seems to admit that he falls short of Prynne; but on a second reading we can see that it is actually an assertion of MacSweeney’s very different artistic ambitions. To risk an overstatement, where Prynne’s poetry enhances the reader’s sensitivity to a plurality of meanings, MacSweeney’s poetry relies for its more conventional effect on directing the reader towards a specific end. Prynne’s relentless interrogation of language in The White Stones reads like a sardonic attack on everything the 60s counter-culture held dear: self-expression, inclusiveness and collectivity. The White Stones is characterised by what Bakhtin calls ‘heteroglossia’ (the assembling, in a single text, of many discourses). Bakhtin attributes heteroglossia to prose rather than poetry: the novelist ‘welcomes the heteroglossia and language diversity of the literary and extra-literary language

112 ‘The Last Bud’, p.15
into his work', whereas language in poetry tends to be monologic, and operates according to centripetal force as the speaker tries to push the elements of his/her language into a single utterance: ‘...stripping all aspects of language of the intentions and accents of other people, destroying all traces of social heteroglossia and diversity of language – a tension filled unity of language is achieved in the poetic work.’ Prynne’s work demonstrates that poetry is capable of this kind of complexity, by continually drawing attention to the shifts and gaps between discourses, and to the contextual frames of each competing unit. The notion of a ‘self’ or an ‘identity’ is destabilised as the speaking voice passes through a series of ever-changing discourses, none of which is permitted to establish authority over another. Prynne became increasingly adept at hiding the impulse behind his writing until, in his later work, the will to self-effacement is one of the few authored gestures identifiable as such. Such a project was entirely at odds with MacSweeney’s priorities: he wrote poems with specific targets in mind.

MacSweeney returns to the bridegroom imagery, and implicitly to his relation to Prynne, in the final section of ‘The Last Bud’:

Now I stand
arm in arm with potency, looking forward,
past both our feet.

The speaker has now become the bridegroom, and is described in terms of Blakean idealisation. To be ‘arm in arm with potency’ is to be united with, but distinct from, one’s drives rather than being overwhelmed by them. The poet is ‘looking forward’ and, rather than falling victim to his own accoutrements, is able to assert mastery over the day by ‘slapping [it] down’. MacSweeney’s relation to Prynne, while it remains that of a mentee, is noticeably more confident than it was in Cabaret. Even the more derivative moments in ‘The Last Bud’ (for example, the haughty tone of MacSweeney’s ‘What pale imitations these people are/about me’ recalls the world-weary, rather prissy phrasing of Prynne’s ‘how very gross out/
threshold for pain has become"¹¹⁷) are more ironic and self-conscious than they were in *Cabaret*.

Mentor or not, Prynne’s significance to MacSweeney goes beyond Bloom’s narrow characterisation of the competitive relationship between poets:

> I have a friend who shelters me, and tho’
> beyond me in years, he is brother,
> father, teacher, child to me, who has
> seen him in different shades, have heard
> the tensile grasp of music, which demands
> much, reducing me to sleep, as some careless
> rock for leverage."¹¹⁸

Bloom can account, however reductively, for Prynne’s influence insofar as it is fatherly, but MacSweeney also sees Prynne as a brother (ie. an equal), and Bloom’s model does not consider the influence of a poet’s peers. Most surprisingly, MacSweeney says Prynne is a ‘child to me’. Prynne was older than MacSweeney, but perhaps MacSweeney is referring to the phenomenon Kierkegaard noted in *Fear and Trembling*: ‘he who is willing to work gives birth to his own father.’¹¹⁹ The fantasy of self-begetting is stated in the non-competitive, non-Bloomian terms of a reciprocally nurturing relation with one’s literary antecedents.

Most poets would have identified this as the moment in which they ‘found their voice’ and proceeded in a more or less linear fashion. Instead, MacSweeney’s subsequent adoption and abandonment of various literary styles means that the question of whether he is producing poetry or merely consuming-and-regurgitating that of others will be raised repeatedly. The paternal pairing of Bunting and Prynne in ‘The Last Bud’ will be replaced by Jim Morrison and Michael McClure (in *Just 22* and *Odes*); Prynne and Eric Mottram (in *Odes* and *Black Torch*); Bob Cobbing and Lee Harwood (in the Poetry Society takeover); and Ken Smith and Basil Bunting (in *Ranter*). The value of the work MacSweeney produced in a given period can usually be ascertained by the ‘strength’ of his two father figures. He was at his best when confronting his earliest and strongest literary father figure, Basil Bunting. When he replaces Bunting with a lesser figure, the effects are disastrous.

¹¹⁷ Prynne, p.55
¹¹⁸ ‘The Last Bud’, p.15
¹¹⁹ Kierkegaard quoted in Bloom, p.56, lengthier quote on pp.72-73
‘The Last Bud’ marks the achievement of a unified persona and records the decision to abandon it in favour of a new understanding of identity based on formation, rupture and reformation. The triumphal rejection with which ‘The Last Bud’ concludes represents a total submission to the calling of poet: all other forms of significance, hope or meaning (love, family life, politics and all but the most steadfast of friends) have been denounced as sham and rejected, building to a dramatic (if unoriginal) darkness/light dichotomy:

Ahead of me
is brilliant darkness, and the king
of night. This is a signed resignation;
I am finished with your kingdom of light.\(^{120}\)

MacSweeney’s breakthrough is not only one of technique but subject matter. The innocent, childlike, ‘natural’ voice proved irksome when it celebrated erotic love or declared its solidarity. Only when this voice rejects all appeals does it become attractive and sympathetic. ‘The Last Bud’ miraculously holds itself together for 200 lines, but has the feeling of a last stand: after this comes MacSweeney’s very different 70s poetry, and the poem actually presages much later, major work. A mark of its success is that the most important voice to haunt the poem is MacSweeney’s own, from twenty or thirty years in the future, when the achievement of ‘The Last Bud’ is finally realised in ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, and ‘Sweeno, Sweeno’: poems in which the persona is again caught in a state of flux.

\(^{120}\) ‘The Last Bud’, p.19
In this chapter I will look at MacSweeney's initial reaction to the traumatic events of 1968: denial. His denial took three forms: first, MacSweeney denied that Vivienne Carlton's abortion had been his idea. Second, he denied that Basil Bunting was his literary father and, having turned away from Bunting in favour of Jeremy Prynne in ‘The Last Bud', spent much of the 70s searching for a replacement 'second father'. Third, MacSweeney denied that he wanted mass acceptance, and began to write for a small, hardcore readership. He designed his poetry to alienate most of the 11,000 people who bought Cabaret, while identifying himself with figures from literature and popular culture who enjoyed a cult following. These figures include Thomas Chatterton, Jim Morrison and Mike McClure: early entries into what I am calling The Barry MacSweeney Hall of Fame.

During this time, MacSweeney’s engagement with the British Poetry Revival and the Poetry Society during the 70s provided him with a small, ‘hardcore' readership that made demands and expected the same. This led MacSweeney to adopt avant-garde forms that were antithetical to his identification with pop culture heroes, his self-projection and the emotional appeals that characterised his earlier work. The resulting work, particularly in Just Twenty Two – And I Don’t Mind Dying (hereafter Just 22) and Odes, was a hybrid of personal, individualist concerns and depersonalising avant-garde techniques. What unites MacSweeney’s work in the 70s is its quality of swerving, and I will consider the ways in which it swerves away from the antecedents it invokes, away from the poet’s stated intentions, and away from the reader’s expectations.

On Not Being Thomas Chatterton: Brother Wolf (1972)

...in a poet’s lament for his precursor... the poet’s own deepest anxieties tend to be uncovered.¹

Early in their careers, both Basil Bunting and MacSweeney appropriated the identity of a precursor poet, under the tutelage of a mentor. In 1923, Bunting moved to Paris and found work as a road digger, artist's model and barman. It was here he met Ezra Pound, whose 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' Bunting rated as 'the foundation document' for modern poetry.  

Shortly afterwards, Bunting was detained by French police for assaulting a police officer and carrying a concealed weapon, and was held for a short time in the same building in which Francois Villon had languished five centuries before. According to the legend, Bunting always kept a copy of Villon in his pocket at this time — something that impressed Pound when they first met, as it was surely supposed to. These coincidences prompted Bunting's first successful poem, 'Villon'.

Although written after a brief spell in a French gaol, 'Villon' draws on Bunting's two-year incarceration in England for his conscientious objection to World War One. For this Bunting received no support from his family or the representatives of his Quaker religion, and we get a sense of his profound isolation in this description of the hallucinogenic effects of reading while on hunger strike in solitary confinement:

They took away the prison clothes and on the frosty nights I froze.
I had a bible where I read that Jesus came to raise the dead —
I kept myself from going mad by singing an old bawdy ballad and birds sang on my windowsill and tortured me till I was ill, but Archipiada came to me and comforted my cold body and Circe excellent utterer of her mind lay with me in that dungeon for a year making a silk purse from an old sow's ear till Ronsard put a thimble on her tongue. Wherein all we differ not. [...]  

Isolation has led Bunting to over-identify with his antecedent. Pursuing this Bloomian line a little further, I note that 'Villon' was written in 1925: the year Bunting's father died, and the

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3 Even when not being held in solitary confinement, the 'silence rule' meant that conscientious objectors were forbidden to speak.
year he found his literary father. Like 'Homage to Sextus Propertius', 'Villon' is a self-projection; and Pound edited the poem down to half its original length and saw that it was published in Poetry (Chicago), where it won the annual Lyric prize of fifty dollars. Pound had used troubadour poetry to critique English literary culture, and Bunting's choice of Villon in a similar role was judicious: close enough to Pound, but respectful of the mentor's turf.

Both 'Villon' and Brother Wolf establish a poetic persona rooted in opposition: where Bunting identifies with a French poet as a means of attacking parochial English literary culture, MacSweeney sees Southern England as a foreign country because of French influence, and he identifies with Chatterton as a way of redefining the English canon. However, both poems are also apprentice works (ambitious, oppositional, derivative, thin) by writers who would take a long time to come into their own. Both assert a false father (Villon and Chatterton) in order to obscure a genuine literary father (Pound and Prynne). Bloom's focus on 'strong' poets and 'strong' antecedents would see MacSweeney and Bunting as failing in their poetic duty to tackle their true poetic fathers, but the techniques they learned in doing so proved essential to the success of the best work.

Chatterton's curse is that his life (age, class, sociological significance, reception) is more interesting than his poetry. It is this curse (not Chatterton's life and certainly not his poetry) that interests MacSweeney. In January 1970, MacSweeney delivered a lecture on Chatterton at Newcastle University that was subsequently published as Elegy for January. The work has little academic value and contains no close reading of the poetry. Instead, it focuses on scandalous biographical information, and on the poems and opinions (often commonplace opinions) of those who came after Chatterton. It is of interest for the light it sheds on MacSweeney's poetic priorities at the time:

What is there, after youth, but sleep, and death, and loss of instinctive beauty? ... Thomas, what is there, after all, after youth. All these poems dedicated to you, written by poets past their teens. Our resilient animal instinctiveness fails us, with age – we cannot hunt any longer, but lag behind for scraps: Only youth can mark the essential path across the world, of people, love, and language.5

5 Barry MacSweeney, Elegy for January, (London: Menard Press, 1970). It commemorates the bi-centenary of Chatterton's death. It was originally an address: 29.1.70, Curtis Auditorium, Newcastle University.
Elegy for January establishes that MacSweeney’s interest in Chatterton stemmed from how Chatterton was received by the poetry establishment of his day, especially his fraught relationship with Hugh Walpole. MacSweeney makes this clear in the Poetry Information interview: ‘Chatterton’s big claim to fame, which was the con, got me very much at that time, with my bloody clashes with Hutchinsons [sic], the big publisher.’

Aggrieved at his unfortunate reception, MacSweeney obsesses about the way Chatterton’s authority and authenticity (slippery terms, but none other will do) were determined by his reception, and in Brother Wolf constructs a new Chatterton to suit his needs. Following Keats’s example, MacSweeney describes Chatterton as a ‘northern’ poet. In a letter to Hamilton Reynolds, 19 September 1819, Keats wrote ‘[Chatterton] is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idioms or particles like Chaucer – ‘tis genuine English idiom in English words’. Keats added, in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats 17 – 27 September 1819: ‘The purest English I think – or what ought to be the purest – is Chatterton’s. The language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer’s Gallicisms and still the old words are used – Chatterton’s language is entirely northern – I prefer the native music of it to Milton’s cut by feet.’ MacSweeney has these letters in mind during the Poetry Information interview in 1974, where he conflates the two into one bizarre, literal image: ‘[Chatterton] was the first English poet with a really northern tongue to escape the Gallic feet of Chaucer…’ Evidently, Keats’s pronouncements on Chatterton appealed to MacSweeney, who, in memorising the quotes presumably interpreted ‘northern’ in his own fashion.

A word here about MacSweeney’s peculiar, and peculiarly English, prejudice regarding Ireland and France. Ireland always held conflicting associations for MacSweeney, standing for his poetic vocation, but also for negative masculinity, violence and retribution, largely because his abusive father was of Irish descent. The equal and opposite consequence of this is that France must stand for femininity and redemption (as in his last book of

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6 Poetry Information, p.32
8 Ibid, p. 325
9 Poetry Information, p. 33.
10 MacSweeney was clearly proud of his name’s association with King Suibne, the Irish warrior-king-poet. Indeed, this may account for why he changed ‘Mc’ to ‘Mac’, but did not want to change his name altogether.
Apollinaire versions), but also for affectation and effeminacy (‘pink fleur de l'ys/ invaded the psalter’). He always refers to Chaucer as a French poet:

French words dominated
Chaucer's day.
They ate away
the oak & rose.  

Throughout his work, MacSweeney habitually pairs France and Ireland, as though citing a self-evident contrast, as in these lines from *Ranter*:

smaller than the word for small
smaller than the French word
the Irish

Northumbria sits uneasily in the middle of this unstable polarity, like a child torn between warring parents. MacSweeney has internalised Protestant England's fear of seeing its Catholic neighbours unite against it. Racist stereotypes are a by-product of the Protestant belief that the English are God's chosen people, and also a means of reassuring ourselves that such different cultures could never work together. To pursue this line a little further, I could speculate that MacSweeney's Protestant heritage would have involved him hearing, on a regular basis, about the most famous occasion when England faced an Irish army supported by French troops: the Battle of the Boyne.

As for the purity or authenticity of Chatterton's language, it would be truer to say that MacSweeney was attracted to its fraudulence. The disinherited often have recourse to the myth of a 'pure tongue' to disguise their ambivalent intimacy with the oppressor. Thus, denied a classical education, Chatterton complains ‘...whoever spekethe Englysch ys despysed,/ The Englysch hym to please moste fyrst be latynized’. Whilst sympathising with the sentiment, it is difficult to ignore the strong iambic rhythm in these lines, carried over

11 'Ranter', p.156
12 'Ode:Resolution', p.56
13 'Ranter', p.144
14 A familiar Protestant text is that, just as the Jews failed to live up to their obligations as God's chosen people, so the English were headed for a Sodom and Gomorrah reckoning. I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter Five.
15 Ibid. MacSweeney goes on to say Chatterton's work is 'very English, back to the source'.
from Latinate European languages by translators such as Chaucer. Far from avoiding French
forms, these lines are alexandrines, a favourite form of Chatterton's. Indeed, Chatterton's
fraudulent medieval works were exposed because of their close adherence to the neoclassical
standards of his day. Likewise, however much MacSweeney wanted to believe in the myth of
the pure tongue, *Brother Wolf* is characterised by collage, quotation, impersonation,
fragmentation and indirection. *Brother Wolf* 's experiments with page lay-out mean that it
occupies an ambiguous position: looking forward to MacSweeney 's 70s work, but also
retreating into the Prynne pastiche we saw in some of *Cabaret* 's poems (albeit with greater
subtlety this time around).

Chatterton's Rowley poems, along with James MacPherson's appropriation of Gaelic
myth in *Ossian*, began a debate over authenticity, arguing that it needed to be sought out
and fought for, rather than conferred by tradition and patronage. The notion that some literary
conventions, traditions and lineages are more authentic than others was the means by which
Chatterton and MacSweeney had been excluded. MacSweeney identified with Chatterton's
predicament before he read any of the actual poetry. Eric Mottram asks him about this: 'So
your interest in Chatterton came about as... an interest in this kind of person. But what about
his work? We're talking about the quality of work too, I take it.' MacSweeney replies
'Well, I hadn't read any. I'd heard about the guy through Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth. So
I went and bought the books, what I could find, and I remember I borrowed or was given one
by Jeremy Prynne, and started reading his work'. Despite MacSweeney 's complaints about
critics who focus on 'this fucking social shit', this was the source of MacSweeney 's interest
in Chatterton; and in *Brother Wolf* MacSweeney wants to draw attention to similarities
between Chatterton's cultural moment and his own.

MacSweeney is still obsessing about Chatterton in 1979, and still projecting his own
anxieties over isolation, neglect and humiliation onto his predecessor:

17 *Brother Wolf* also includes alexandrines: 'It is a leaf which falls in autumn like a poem./ Chatterton looked at
Mole and did not hear it fall'. See *'Brother Wolf', p.29
19 Ibid., p.32
20 Ibid., p.32
21 See *Poetry Information*, p.37, where MacSweeney says: 'Every other single crit I've ever had [with the
exception of Jim Burns in *Ambit*] was malicious; they hadn't talked about the poetry at all, they've talked about
me being on the dole and being without A Levels or a degree; they've pulled this fucking social shit... '
A young poet needs to be encouraged, and welcomed into the company of other writers. Real talent can be frustrated and useful ambitions thwarted without the gentle hand of other poets who can pass on their experience. A poet commits himself at an early age to a life dedicated to writing; the burden is hard enough without the added load of separation and scorn. Thomas Chatterton, the Bristol poet, is a prime example of these pitfalls. Branded by plagiarist Walpole as a liar and cheat, the lad's fierce pride led him to suicide. He died friendless.  

Reading this, we remember MacSweeney's comments about the lack of support from the Newcastle scene and the absence of guidance from fellow poets — as we are supposed to: MacSweeney is flaunting his similarity to Chatterton. *Brother Wolf* is the point at which MacSweeney begins using his poems to generate fictions about himself; part-identifying with various distorting surrogate figures. In this case, his rejection by the establishment (symbolised by Oxford) and his perceived mistreatment at the hands of his publisher have enabled MacSweeney to identify himself with Chatterton and project himself as a Chattertonesque young northern genius.

The ideal reader might consider the title of *Brother Wolf* to be a poem in itself, proposing a sympathetic identification with Chatterton while acknowledging the problematic nature of such an enterprise: how do you claim solidarity with a lone wolf? The title, suggesting a unified, clear and direct utterance, is belied by a poem marked by fragmentation, uncertainty and obsessive repetition; and while the poem considers several images for the creative artist (including bees, moles, figures from Classical mythology, and Chatterton's own reception as a poet) the promised wolf does not appear. This tension between title and poem is a sign of the extra effort MacSweeney's readers will now have to make: in its subject matter, *Brother Wolf* does not greatly differ from "The Last Bud", its significance lies in the way it holds the reader to a different contract.

Consisting of thirty sections, each employing a different page layout, *Brother Wolf* is designed to appear more fragmented than it really is. In fact, the poem falls into four movements; the first three each comprise nine sections, the fourth movement is only three sections long. These movements are not signalled by the poem itself, and are felt as gradual shifts of emphasis. The first movement (sections 1-9) considers traditional images of artistic creation, origination and influence; in particular fire, water and bees. In the second movement (sections 10-18), we find an increasing use of fragmentation and repetition of earlier lines.

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22 *South East Arts Review*, p.39
The third movement (sections 19-27) introduces *disjecta membra* imagery alongside a consideration of Chatterton’s reception by literary society; and the fourth movement (sections 28-30) provides a summary coda.

The poem begins with some compressed, impressionistic lines that contain three important image clusters associated with artistic creation: fire, water and bees:

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the fire-crowned terrain
as the sea burns
wind
You can’t burn your boats when you live inland
Chatterton
Knowing this
Died
Rosy myth
bee-like
we cluster & suck. 23
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Fire is personified by Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods) and water by Orpheus (Orphic rituals were often quests for water, symbolic of man’s transitory identity). The symbol of Promethean fire is traditionally associated with originating genius, but Prometheus’ status as originator is debatable: his gift of fire was an act of transgression against a father, and as such part of the series of treacheries and rebellions – dependent on a pre-existing system of morality – that helped establish the Greek gods. 24 *Brother Wolf* takes pains to undermine any possibility of striking an elevated note by its abundance of puns and wordplay. For example, the visionary line ‘he saw fire where other men saw firewood’ is taken literally: ‘And leapt into the fire.’ 25 Later, the poet again tries to express such an imaginative leap metaphorically, clamning to have ‘a brain of fire’. No sooner uttered, this too is undermined by literalism: ‘Now there are ashes in my head.’ 26 If the attempt at striking a visionary note collapses into bathos, how can the speaker hope to become the kind of poet Rimbaud referred to when he said ‘truly then, the poet is a thief of fire’? 27

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23 ‘Brother Wolf’ , p.23

24 Prometheus was a Titan: one of the second generation of gods who rebelled first against Uranus and Gaia, then (after Uranus had been deposed and castrated by Kronos) against their new leader. In stealing fire from the gods and creating/saving human beings, Prometheus was continuing this tradition of rebellion against father figures. See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1992) pp.143-149.

25 ‘Brother Wolf’, p.23

26 Ibid., p.30

The answer appears to lie in the second image cluster: water symbolises a cyclic relation to the source. The river empties into the sea, which is ultimately also its source, and likewise MacSweeney honours Chatterton as a source of inspiration, but in doing must construct the poet anew. Similarly, Chatterton invented his own antecedent/alter-ego, in the figure of Rowley:

Chatterton knew
you may not return to the source
when you're
it and
died. 28

Chatterton's creation of his own antecedent was informed by the practical requirement that the figure should have no descendents; therefore he made Rowley a priest. Likewise, MacSweeney's construction of Chatterton can also be understood as the deliberate creation of a weak father, by a poet determined to prove his superiority. Rimbaud was arguably a greater influence on MacSweeney's writing at this time, but he didn't dare take him on. Because Chatterton died young, and since what he did write was produced under bizarre circumstances, much of his significance lies in what he might have achieved had he lived. Such speculation would be an imposition if applied to a more established figure. MacSweeney's appropriation of Chatterton in Brother Wolf is a precursor to his later, more daring use of contemporary non-poet icons such as Jim Morrison or Robert Johnson.

The third traditional image of the artist is the bee. Socrates, in Plato's Ion, claims that the poet gathers poetry from 'honey-springs' because he is 'a light thing, and winged and holy, and cannot compose before he gets inspiration and loses control of his senses and his reason has deserted him. No man, so long as he keeps that, can prophesy or compose'. 29 MacSweeney would also subscribe to this dichotomy between poetic excess and un-poetic reason, but in Brother Wolf he introduces bees as follows: 'Rosy myth/ bee-like/ we cluster & suck.' 30 Where Socrates uses the bee to symbolise the muse-possessed poet, MacSweeney's bee stands for the reader. The source-rose is a 'myth' and it is significant that MacSweeney

28 'Brother Wolf', p.25
30 'Rosy myth' is an allusion to Shelley's description of Chatterton as 'rose pale'.

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sees the reader, rather than the writer, as the locus of creative energy. Upon the reappearance of the bees in section Eighteen, the more sinister implications of ‘cluster & suck’ become apparent: ‘Bee-like. The randomness of (his) death.’ Bees are also traditionally an image for mass, uniform intelligence and solidarity through rigid hierarchy. Here, regimentation has degenerated into unthinking actions: there is no reason for the bees to be there, as we are told there is ‘No rose. No honey/ suckle on the vine’. The readers have triumphed over the writer, just as MacSweeney’s readers triumphed over him, and just as he now hopes to triumph over Chatterton. Requiring the reader to participate in the creation of a poem’s meaning (to a greater extent than is usual) would become a hallmark of the experimental poetry MacSweeney embraced in the 70s. At this stage, MacSweeney is not altogether happy with the way the value and meaning of a text are conferred by its reception, but is trying to find ways to turn the situation to his advantage.

The second movement (sections 10 – 18) is characterised by fragmentation and an increasing number of voices being heard in the text. Language fragments and moves into a space strewn with the remnants of competing discourses concerned with containing, or accounting for, poetic inspiration:

Bee-like. The randomness of (his) death
the particular randomness
of. Towards which blood he ran the soft
floor of his eye. A final showing. Up
there they strap two rams to
gether the.
Walpole slew. No rose. No honey
suckle on the vine. The rain
Hurt
with its own
soft density
falls.
No.31

It is tempting to argue that, as in a Prynne poem, attention is being drawn to the shifts and gaps between discourses, and to the contextual frames of each competing unit. However, the organisation required by collage strongly implies the presence of a manipulating ego, and the reader of Brother Wolf experiences an intensification rather than dissipation of writerly intent. Whereas Prynne was increasingly able to hide the impulse behind his poetry,

31 ‘Brother Wolf’, p.28
MacSweeney could not yet do this (he will come closer in his next poem, Just 22). Furthermore, the fragmentation of *Brother Wolf* is contained within the somewhat contrived structure of the poem. I suspect that, whatever its surface complexity, *Brother Wolf* was originally conceived as having a clear message that may be intuited from the title.

In the third movement (sections 19 – 27) fragmentation gives way to imagery of fragmented bodies, as MacSweeney returns to his obsession with Chatterton's reception. These sections include five references to lips, four to hearts, and various mentions of flesh, bodies, brains, cocks, wings, teeth, hair and nakedness. Eyes are stuck to mountains and melt into cups, bodies are used for staircases and eaten by fish, hearts become livers and trees sprout from eye sockets. Such imagery is implicit in the Classical figures to whom MacSweeney refers in the opening sections: Prometheus' liver was torn out daily, and Orpheus was torn limb from limb by the Maenads, wild women of Thrace.32 *Brother Wolf*'s imagery of *disjecta membra* counterpoints the bourgeois individualist image of the genius poet starving in a garret: the sort of figure Chatterton was posthumously conscripted into presenting.33 Henry Wallis portrayed the 'wonderful boy' as an Adonis-like embodiment of youthful beauty: only in death did Chatterton achieve such Classical unity, in a balanced, conventional portrait. *Brother Wolf* is an act of artistically fruitful denial: MacSweeney is drawn to the heroic individualism of this portrait, but painfully aware that the consequences of naming yourself a poet are less than glamorous, and played out in terms of social status:

splintering his crystal  
because he wants to keep his body in shape & not spread it around  
all over the estuary  
rapidly losing the social advantages  
of becoming a human-being...34

Death cannot dismember the poet – Chatterton only appears fully integrated, fully *realised* in death, in Wallis's portrait – but prejudicial reception can. Section 23 consists of a quotation from one such early reaction to Chatterton:

'The whole of Chatterton's life presents

32 After Orpheus had been torn apart, his head was thrown into the river Hebrus, where it floated downstream (still singing) and out to sea, arriving at the isle of Lesbos. Eventually the head was laid to rest in a cave at Antissa, where it continued to prophesy, until silenced by Apollo. See Graves, pp. 111-115.
33 Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton* (1856)
34 'Brother Wolf', p.26
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.  

The inadequacy of the 'official' response is unmistakable: the system of control and reward it recommends is precisely the one Chatterton attempted to subvert, and the reviewer's official, conventional language seems to signal his inadequacy. The grammatical control of this long sentence with many sub-clauses contrasts markedly with Chatterton's – and MacSweeney's – impetuosity. Since conventional, official language has been the scene of betrayal and loss of authenticity, it is rejected in *Brother Wolf*. Instead, words and images are fragmented and repeated fugally in various tenses and as various parts of speech, destabilising the idea of an author dispensing meaning to a reader, and stressing instead the social expectations that determine reception, and the literary traditions which determine our judgment. Because it is the corrupt, fickle social arena that creates/sanctions what passes for authenticity (Walpole was 'illustriously fabricated') it follows that the only proof of a poet's authenticity will be social exclusion: 'it is better to be unnatural.' This is much the same conclusion as the one arrived at in 'The Last Bud', but MacSweeney will put it into practice differently, by challenging and swerving away from the reader.

As I have said, the wolf in *Brother Wolf* stays in the title; instead, we hear a lot from the figure of Mole. Mole 'avoids roads' (designated paths) in favour of 'peace and solitude', hence his status as a symbol of a particular kind of visionary endeavour: to stay focused on the ultimate goal while rejecting the conventional means of attaining it. The mole has long been a symbol of quiet (underground) and often doomed opposition to authority, with its

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35 'Brother Wolf', p.30
36 'Brother Wolf', p.32
37 *Elegy to January*, p.31
molehills symbolising its aspirations, and providing the means of the animal's capture.\textsuperscript{38}

_Brother Wolf_ specifies _Hamlet_ as its primary reference point:

He stood at the coal-face like Hamlet  
and struck a match. Eyeballs  
melted into his cup.

At the pit-head  
local idlers waited for news. There was only  
a brief burst of laughter.  
Underneath, the mole shook hands with English poetry.\textsuperscript{39}

These lines refer obliquely to _Hamlet_, I.v.170. Having spoken with what appears to be the ghost of his father, Hamlet demands that his companions swear to keep the event a secret. The ghost himself, from under the stage, cries: 'Swear by his sword.' Hamlet replies: 'Well said, old mole. Canst work i'th'earth so fast?/ A worthy pioner!' A pioner was 'a foot-soldier who preceded the main army with spade or pick-axe, hence a digger, and so, as here, a miner'.\textsuperscript{40} Hamlet quibbles on the folk belief that miners were in league with the devil, on account of their workplace being situated closer to hell. The 'old mole' may not be the true ghost of his father, and the 'brief burst of laughter' in _Brother Wolf_ when Mole shakes hands with the dead Chatterton is similarly indeterminate. To what extent can these demonic fathers be trusted?

I propose the real father-figure in _Brother Wolf_ is the poet who led MacSweeney to Chatterton in the first place: Jeremy Prynne. The reason for the poem's surface complexity may be the dedication to Prynne which stands, aptly enough, between the title and the poem. MacSweeney's dedications often signify not only the poem's gift status but also a dialogic exchange from which a general reader may be excluded. I began this section by comparing _Brother Wolf_ to 'Villon', which Bunting wrote under the influence of his poetic father Pound. A major difference between the relationship Pound and Prynne fostered with their disciples is that Pound edited their work, whereas Prynne encouraged excess.


\textsuperscript{39} 'Brother Wolf', p.24

\textsuperscript{40} William Shakespeare, _Hamlet_, ed., Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1992) p.226
If Prynne is the genuine father-figure behind *Brother Wolf*, then the poem's purported concern with Chatterton is an example of MacSweeney covering his tracks, a characteristic of the wolf:

The mighty wolf makin' a midnight creep,
The hunters, they can't find him,
Stealin' chicks everywhere he go,
Then draggin' his tail behind him...

I'm a tail dragger, I wipe out my tracks,
When I get what I want I don't come sneakin' back.\(^{41}\)

Nevertheless, *Brother Wolf* is a transitional work: MacSweeney is yet to shake off the trappings of a poet with a mass audience in mind: he has a subject, a point of view and an argument; and he is still evidently concerned to project a self-image. Prynne once wrote of his own methods "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 position within this world."\(^{42}\) MacSweeney's work throughout the 70s is an attempt to graft such priorities onto his own, quite different agenda. I do not interpret this as artistic failure, as the resulting hybrid is more interesting than either straightforward confession appeal or a more careful assimilation of Prynne's poetics would have been. During this period, MacSweeney's poems are at odds with themselves, but their struggle towards meaning is more compelling than the more directed poetry of *Cabaret*.

**On Not Being Jim Morrison: *Just Twenty-Two And I Don't Mind Dying* (1971)**

*Just 22* pursues the conflicted, oppositional poetics that MacSweeney had embraced in *Brother Wolf*: it too is a product of the poet's denial, and is an attempt to redefine the kind of poet he wanted to be, and the kind of audience he sought. Again, I do not use the word 'denial' pejoratively: MacSweeney's denial produces poetry that is much better than his more directed earlier writing. *Just 22*’s attitude toward the reader is especially contradictory.

\(^{41}\) Chester Arthur Burnett (Howlin' Wolf), 'Tail Dragger', *Howlin Wolf: His Best Vol. 2* (Chess, 1999) [written by Willie Dixon, 1962]

\(^{42}\) Jeremy Prynne, quoted in Robert Potts, "Through the Oval Window", Guardian [accessed 8.8.08]
Having misrepresented himself in *Cabaret*, and having been more damagingly misrepresented by the media, MacSweeney was disinclined to present the kind of single, unified persona that might have appealed to a popular audience; but his buried wish for such an audience may be inferred by his identification with the pop culture hero Jim Morrison. Morrison’s presence is also part of MacSweeney’s reaction to the humiliating Oxford experience: for the rest of his career, he would adopt personae that stood in defiance of an academic route to acceptance. Rejecting both a popular audience and academic acceptance, MacSweeney embraced the emerging avant-garde, which had its own glamorous heroes who (like the heroes of popular culture) were often North American: the Beats, the New York Poets and the Black Mountain Poets. Furthermore, the books produced by avant-garde presses such as Ferry Press, Trigram, Fulcrum and Goliard were attractive art objects in their own right. This, and the fact that they were hard to come by, added to their authors’ mystique in the eyes of MacSweeney who, throughout the 70s, published his work with what Peter Barry calls ‘the ‘posh’ end of the small-press publishing scene’.⁴³

*Just 22* is MacSweeney’s most concerted engagement with popular culture to date. Since the 60s, Western culture has offered TV, movies, pop songs and lifestyle magazines as the primary means of self-definition, and MacSweeney’s work is distinguished by its swift response to such cultural changes. Surprisingly few poets have been able to successfully admit such phenomena into their work, perhaps because popular culture heroes rarely propose structured arguments: instead, they embody desirable qualities. Appearance, attitude and gesture supersede insight and argument. Pop rebel heroes define themselves vaguely if at all: Q: ‘What are you rebelling against?’ A: ‘What you got?’⁴⁴ Because he came to maturity in the late 60s, MacSweeney’s Hall of Fame consists of rebels who are notably more articulate and politically motivated than their 50s counterparts: the complexity and experimentation of the work of Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix and above all Bob Dylan was rewarded by a popular following in the period. Like Morrison and Dylan, MacSweeney combines his self-projection as a popular culture hero with challenging forms; but at this time, Dylan and Morrison were seen as Messiah-like figures rather than mere pop stars, so it was an act of hubris on MacSweeney’s part to think he could emulate them. The

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⁴³ Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) p.68

Brother’Wolf was a particularly beautiful book with a cutaway cover and printed on high quality paper, while *Just 22* was ‘reissued’ in 1973 by Turpin Press in an edition shaped like a 45 single, complete with record sleeve.

⁴⁴ A celebrated exchange from *The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1953)
consequences of shunning a mass following are different if you don’t have a mass following to begin with: MacSweeney was just a celebrity, and the large readership for his first collection was engineered by his publisher by means of a publicity stunt.

That MacSweeney’s obsession with the genius who dies young stems as much from popular culture figures such as Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones and Janis Joplin as it does from Shelley and Chatterton is blindingly obvious from MacSweeney’s poetry, correspondence, library and record collection; I restate it here because so many critics denigrate popular influences at the expense of more traditional literary reference points. Here’s Clive Bush:

The themes of Just Twenty Two – and I don’t mind dying are taken up and deepened in Brother Wolf (1972), where there is rather less reliance on French and American sources for thematic material and more on a native tradition: a native tradition, however, which needs to be reinvented against prevailing canons. 45

Bush typically places MacSweeney in a ‘native tradition’ and deprecates the influence of popular culture and foreign influence. I find this odd, since one of the exciting things about MacSweeney’s 70s work is its refusal to endorse conventional hierarchies. Bush considers Brother Wolf to be a development of Just 22, but when Eric Mottram suggested Brother Wolf stood as a ‘summary’ of earlier work, MacSweeney concurred, saying ‘Once I had written the Morrison poems, I was aware that I really could not go back to using the kind of forms I was using in Brother Wolf...’ 46 Although published first, Just 22 constitutes a more decisive break with regular syntax and method than Brother Wolf. Bush continues:

Like Robert Duncan in America, MacSweeney returned to the strengths of the Romantic tradition to revitalise English poetry. A fascination with the young-dead haunts the young MacSweeney and here connects all the poets (‘James Dean’ characters) that he was involved with in the mid-seventies: Chatterton, Shelley, Keats, Rimbaud, Jim Morrison. 47

The presence of Robert Duncan, James Dean, Rimbaud and Jim Morrison might have alerted Bush to the international and extra-curricular nature of MacSweeney’s sympathies; and an

46 Poetry Information, p.37
47 Clive Bush, p.343
obsession with youth suggests the influence of popular culture as much as any literary influence.

When asked about the connection between 60s rock and the poetic methods employed in *Just 22*, MacSweeney replied:

"Just Twenty-Two and I don't Mind Dying" is from a Willie Dixon blues song which Morrison revived on one of their LPs. The style is compressed, paratactic. You know what I mean - commas acting as magnets drawing the next thing in, without having to go into 'ands,' 'thes', all sorts of descriptive shit. What you're getting in fact was the facets of a diamond... like Gaudier-Brzeska's sculpture. ... I'd never dealt with shape before... ... I knew I couldn't go back and start writing your little lyrical poems again, linear stuff. 48

Having appropriated the declaration 'just twenty two and I don't mind dyin'' as his title, MacSweeney found that it could not be bettered, only swerved away from. MacSweeney was aware that his engagement with popular culture coincided with the increased difficulty of the work itself: 'If I go from *Brother Wolf* to *Just Twenty-Two*, people just think, well what's he trying to do? You can see the complete look of bewilderment.' 49 The paradox of both courting and alienating a mass audience would define MacSweeney's work from *Just 22* to *Jury Vet*, and suggests his conflicted motives for writing throughout this period.

MacSweeney's post-*Boulevard* audience-alienating instincts show the influence of Bob Dylan, who continually challenged his audience by taking on new personae and musical forms. Dylan's early image was of a folksy, savvy Huck Finn character, and the reinvigorated trope of wise, wandering youth informs much of MacSweeney's early poetry ('we are young dont [sic] touch us/ we make love and we are refreshed' 50). Similarly, *Cabaret's* blurb presents MacSweeney as a young troubadour:

In his writing, in his personality, in his following, Barry MacSweeney is a kind of poet who is relatively new in this country. In Europe, in America, there have been writers who have recalled the lives and the spirits of the medieval troubadours, travelling from town to town with their songs. At 20, Barry MacSweeney has joined that tradition... The love poems are for people who are young. 51

48 *Poetry Information*, p.36. The song to which MacSweeney refers is 'Who Do You Love', and was actually written by Bo Diddley.
49 *Poetry Information*, p.37
50 'Touching', *Cabaret*, p.53
51 *Cabaret* blurb.
This promotional Dylanesquery was written by Hutchinson's poetry editor Michael Dempsey, a committed Dylan fan who would go on to commission Dylan biographies. In the 1974 *Poetry Information* interview, MacSweeney complains that Dempsey benefited from the Oxford Chair debacle: 'Michael Dempsey was a graduate, he was just the poetry editor which was the bargain basement, downstairs, at Hutchinsons. Now he's a director of McGibbon and Kee's, as a direct result of selling my book, and that is a grade one fact. He used it as a massive catapult for himself.'\(^5^2\) Dempsey's plans for the follow-up to *Cabaret* suggest the rock-star treatment was to continue: 'Hutchinsons wanted to do a second book and have contracts for numbers of books. And I actually had a contract for a live LP recording at the Roundhouse. All sorts of things — a tour of the States and so on.'\(^5^3\) Dylan's influence on MacSweeney's early persona was not simply a marketing ploy: MacSweeney strongly identified with Dylan and followed his music closely, buying the earliest bootlegs (*The Great White Hope*) and reading *Tarantula*. That MacSweeney should present *Just 22* as a biography of Jim Morrison rather than Dylan seems eccentric, but just as *Brother Wolf* concerned Chatterton rather than Rimbaud, MacSweeney wanted to take on the less formidable antecedent. Morrison was more of a sub-Rimbaudian figure than Dylan would ever allow himself to become, and having died young, Morrison, like Chatterton, was ripe for appropriation.

*Just 22* is subtitled 'The Official Poetical Biography of Jim Morrison – Rock Idol'. Calling the book a biography is a development of MacSweeney's tactics in 'The Last Bud' and *Brother Wolf*, in which literary antecedents were mis-read and false antecedents declared. The possibility that this biography might be 'official' (i.e. authorised by the Jim Morrison estate) is immediately qualified by the more slippery term 'poetical'. Furthermore, this will not be a biography of Jim Morrison, but of 'Jim Morrison – Rock Idol', suggesting the perspective of an adoring fan. John James's preface, with its typos and excited misquotation, reads like a fanzine editorial: 'From his secret lair deep in grim South East London, The Scarlet Wolf-Boy has authorised a re-issue of his famous official biography of Jim Morrison, that gread [sic] dead locus vivendi of The Doors. [...]\(^5^4\) James presents MacSweeney as a Morrison-like figure, and assures us that *Just 22* is a gig we need to attend. A footnote to the

\(^{5^2}\) *Poetry information*, p.25

\(^{5^3}\) Ibid., p.31. Whether or not this is true is less important than what it says about how MacSweeney saw himself and how he could be marketed.

\(^{5^4}\) *'Just 22'* , p.20
Instead of a narrative, *Just 22* consists of a collage of lines that range in tone from the faux-naïf ‘If finesse is crinkly you’re a Dairy Box wrapper’, 55 (which sounds like a parody of his earlier posturing) to ‘Wake up cunt you’re living your life in bed’, 56 (which reads like a particularly bracing translation of Rilke’s exhortation ‘Du Musst dein Leben ändern’). The poem captures the new priorities of late 60s culture in the relish it takes in its own novelty, and in its impatience for pleasure: why build context, can’t we just have the best lines right now? Collage and other process-focussed approaches for generating texts can be seen as avant-garde responses to the primacy of the personality in popular culture. Collage allows the poet to have it both ways: it eschews self-expression while simultaneously implying strong ego-presence in the organisation of the material. Collage enabled much of MacSweeney’s 70s work, and is congruent with his engagement in popular culture from *Just 22*, when he was trying to escape from the Liverpool-influenced *Cabaret* persona, to *Jury Vet*, a poem whose inflammatory subject (sexual violence) places an intolerable strain on collage’s ostensible escape from identifiably authored gestures. In *Jury Vet*, the form emerges as the naturalistic expression of a speaker who has internalised conflicting societal demands without recourse to a morally discriminating conscience: an American Psycho in Newcastle.

*Just 22* has a more tangential relationship with its alleged subject than had *Brother Wolf*, and Tony Lopez has noted that the language of *Just 22* ‘is in no sense Morrison’s language, though it might be Rimbaud’s’. 58 Instead of biographical detail, MacSweeney presents us with an attempt to capture in language some of Morrison’s aura. Of course, just what constitutes Morrison’s aura is a subjective matter, but it is certainly a non-verbal, non-intellectual quality. Accordingly, *Just 22* yields little to a Leavisite close reading. The poem is a non-linear compendium of momentary attitudes and one-liners; an attempt to outflank language and bottle something of Morrison’s spirit. The poem begins:

Rock litmus. Titration from Springfield, she
wore no colour besides, unfashionable & mean, held

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55 Ibid., p.21
56 Ibid., p.20
58 Tony Lopez, ‘Sustainable Poetics’, *Parataxis* No. 5 (Winter 93-94) p.87
such chemistry in high frond.
Nothing else to commend her before she died.59

This opening stanza contains a typical mix of registers: in chemistry, ‘titration’ is the process by which the concentration of a reactant is deduced; ‘Springfield’ is (you guessed it) a reference to Dusty; and the word ‘commend’ reminds me of St Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Chapter Three begins:

1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? 2 Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men: 3 For as much as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart. 4 And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

MacSweeney would almost certainly have heard Pastor Cook preach this favourite Protestant text, and we can relate his attempt to capture Morrison’s aura to the Protestant preference for the dynamic spirit over the dead letter. Like all of MacSweeney’s most successful work of the 70s, Just 22 exhibits a strong individualist impulse, an impatience with the text, and a preference for personal conviction over rational argument. In Odes, MacSweeney will take the hero-worship a stage further and present himself as though he were the source of adoration, the way a preacher might begin to present himself as the leader of a cult.

Just 22 enacts the ‘freak out’: that quintessentially 60s notion of the sudden insight that obliterates and reintegrates the ego; the poem that changes your life. It is a ritualistic, shamanistic poem, though it is the shamanism of Jim Morrison rather than Ted Hughes. To cite a religious context may seem anachronistic, but the ‘freak out’ was understood as a form of spiritual renewal. This redemptive context will be confirmed twenty years later, when MacSweeney writes Memos: Robert Johnson has replaced Jim Morrison as the purported focal point, so the collection differs stylistically from Just 22. Nevertheless, it too is concerned with changing and bettering the self; just as the compulsive drinker, or the compulsive blues singer, believes that the answer may be found in one more drink, or one more song.

59 ‘Just 22’, p.20
MacSweeney claims to have written *Just 22* having taken 'about 45 Benzedrine... in about 4 hours... that was the ritual'\(^\text{60}\). The ritualistic element is what gives the poem coherence: like a Doors concert, the poem presents itself as a sort of medicine show, selling the reader an elixir that will make their head an interesting place to be. Benzedrine is a form of amphetamine with a euphoric stimulant effect. It is debatable whether *Just 22* was genuinely written under its influence, or whether MacSweeney's boast was an allusion to Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs or indeed Judy Garland, all of whom were fans/addicts of Benzedrine. Moving at great speed among private associations, the poem succeeds in translating the sensation of being stoned onto the sober page: without a context, lines such as 'What do you think I am, a prostitute?'\(^\text{61}\) become irresistibly funny. Being stoned frequently gives rise to the sensation of being on the cusp of a greater understanding of the universe: you feel 'at one' with everything. Likewise, *Just 22* is jewelled with moments that promise, and go on promising, to reveal themselves as epiphanies:

You ignored this? You are ignorant of life itself. Corn in the washboard, the Polack's yem, buried in a mouth-organ.
Following, il a neige au bain, toujours.\(^\text{62}\)

The tone of these lines (representative of the poem in general) is interrogative and urgent, but lacking in specificity. We are not told what 'this' refers to, only that it proves our ignorance of 'life itself'. Other lines resemble an inebriated attempt at conveying strongly felt emotions: 'I'm glad she doesn't live here. It would be like/ jelly. Forced to make her tinkle. That's love.'\(^\text{63}\) Acid trips are characterised by intense colours, shifting shapes, and enhanced awareness. Several parts of the brain are stimulated simultaneously, creating a new synthesis of thought/feeling/perception, a sense of complete absorption in experience and general disorientation. *Just 22* enacts such phenomena through sudden switches in discourse, between high and low idioms, and between languages (English and French):

Blow and she tinkles. Burn the desk, my new vampire, blousy and blue. Giraffes invade the hands

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\(^{60}\) *Poetry Information*, p.36
\(^{61}\) 'Just 22', p.21
\(^{62}\) Ibid., p.22
\(^{63}\) Ibid., p.21
Where Brother Wolf summarised MacSweeney's progress to date, Just 22 points out the future direction of MacSweeney's best work. Throughout the 70s, MacSweeney will embrace a poetry of swerving: not in the Bloomian sense of swerving anxiously away from a precursor poet; but away from his own stated intentions, that is, swerving away from his implicit contract with the reader. The title of a poem is a promise, and in the broken promises of MacSweeney's misleading titles (a 'biography' that contains no biographical detail, an 'ode' that is not technically an ode) a gap of meaning is implied: an ungraspable quality in the poetry that means it continually withdraws from the reader even as the reader tries to approach it. This is accompanied by a newfound sense of expansiveness, as if the poet has discovered he no longer has to be direct and is testing how indirect he can be. On these terms, it is not the poet's job to communicate but to dazzle the reader with beautiful, desirable effects. This is connected to the Morrison-derived notion of the poet as shaman, in which the poem becomes a ritualised performance that proves his powers.

Chairman Bar and the Rat-bags Down at Earls Court

The secret history of what Eric Mottram referred to as 'the British Poetry Revival of the 1960s and 1970s' is as arcane a field of study as the heresies and schisms of the early Church. The plethora of original pamphlets and chapbooks cannot be located without a team of private detectives and a hefty bank balance.  

In 1971, when Just 22 was written, poetry's popularity had started to decline. By 1974, most commentators agree that there had been a drastic reduction in poetry audiences. This has been linked to the collapse of popular Leftist aspirations, which suggests the tide had been going out since 1968 (there must be a lot more beach today). Did the increasingly complex poetry being written by the best poets scare off the audience, who wanted more immediate pleasures? Or did going to poetry readings simply cease to be fashionable, causing the poets to lose interest in being comprehensible? Either way, by 1974 the bubble had burst. Baby

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64 Ibid., p.20
boomers were growing up, the hippies were becoming property developers and arms dealers, and soon poetry was a minority interest again. The shrinking audience galvanized the radicals to seize the halls of power: in 1971 Eric Mottram became editor of *Poetry Review* and, during his time in post (1971-77) the Poetry Society was chaired by a succession of avant-garde poets, including MacSweeney. The Presidents during this period were Hugh MacDiarmid and Basil Bunting. This was the time of the British Poetry Revival.66

The term British Poetry Revival was coined by Mottram67 and adopted by many other commentators including MacSweeney.68 The Revival aimed at returning British poetry to the Modernist tradition after what it saw as the aberration of the Movement. According to Andrew Crozier ‘the redefinition of taste in the 50s had had to be enacted by means of a wholesale rewriting of and reorientation towards the history of modern poetry, and this included the virtual suppression of parts of it’.69 Crozier’s essay should be read alongside Donald Davie’s ‘Remembering the Movement’: a candid account of how the Movement’s manipulation of publicity was accompanied by self-imposed limitations on tone and subject matter.70 Nevertheless, all literary movements depend to some extent on a mis-reading of what has gone before, and like a lot of Revival rhetoric, Crozier’s argument comes close to implying that there had once been a golden age in which challenging, Modernist poets were read by a broad, enthusiastic audience. Mottram’s uncertainty over the role of the audience is evident when he blames censors for preventing avant-garde poetry from reaching a wider audience, implying that the poetry’s quality might otherwise have been measured by its breadth of appeal. Mottram often sounds poised indeterminately between the optimistic 60s “seize the power” attitude (epitomised by the 1965 Albert Hall poetry reading) and the acceptance of exclusion that would characterise the avant-garde scene in the 80s:

The work was published by a large number of small presses and magazines, and therefore was easily available to anyone really interested in poetry, although not, of course, at the controlling High Street booksellers. The new poetry was also ignored or attacked by charity-giving bodies like the Arts Council and the radio and television

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66 The following account of MacSweeney’s involvement in the Poetry Society is indebted to Peter Barry, *Poetry Wars: British Poetry of the 1970s and the Battle of Earls Court* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006)
68 *South East Arts Review*, pp.33-46
comptrollers and censors. These and the rest of the establishment were, and remain, mainly a flaccid hangover from the dominant tastes of the thirties, forties and fifties.\textsuperscript{71} Mottram is passionately partisan; his appetite for power games is apparent, as is a willingness to write off areas in which a wider interest in poetry might have been fostered. Then there are the lazy generalisations of ‘the rest of the establishment’: who does Mottram mean? It is not clear whether ‘the dominant tastes of the thirties, forties and fifties’ refers to Auden and Spender, the New Apocalypse writers, the Movement, or another group, and throws into question what the Revival was reviving (1920s Modernism presumably, except Eliot is dismissed as an ‘ape’). The idea of small press poetry being easily available is ridiculous: its scarcity accounted for much of its mystique; and the bewildering number of small publications was and is enough to scare off all but the most dedicated enthusiasts. Nevertheless, I use the term Revival here primarily for chronological reasons: it is useful to distinguish between the experimental poetry of the 70s and that of the 80s, which became known as Linguistically Innovative Poetry or LIP.\textsuperscript{72}

For a few years, official and unofficial poetries were brought within spitting distance of each other. Since MacSweeney had abandoned the Liverpool-derived techniques that had once promised mass acceptance, in favour of avant-garde techniques that would provide him with a small cultish audience, he was quick to find positive aspects to a diminished poetry audience:

There were hundreds of magazines in the late 60s, weren’t there, and most of them have died for one reason or another – the dream is over, and most of them went bankrupt – but what was left was good, because it was the hard core of people who really wanted to do it, who were doing it well, who were really interested and wanted to keep in touch. So that’s why it’s healthier now than it ever really was.\textsuperscript{73}

If this is to be believed, MacSweeney was happy to embrace a smaller readership. Five years later, when he is commissioned to write an essay about experimental British poetry of the 70s, MacSweeney is still in denial:

\textsuperscript{71} ‘The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75’, pp.15-50
\textsuperscript{72} LIP, or Linguistically Innovative Poetry, was coined by Gilbert Adair in Robert Sheppard’s Pages, in order to give a name to the range of experimental poetry being written in the 80s. I will consider the differences between Revival and LIP poetries in Chapter Four.
\textsuperscript{73} Poetry Information, p. 38
[The small presses] were publishing what happened then, that month, even that week. The act of printing and distribution was (and is) immediate. Poets realised that it was no use hanging about waiting for Big Publishers to pick up on the scene. It was down to us to start an alternative network of magazines and books, bypassing the usual strictly-controlled distribution channels.\textsuperscript{74}

This was the last gasp of MacSweeney's denial, and he had already begun writing \textit{Jury Vet}: a poem that is driven by a wish to offend and alienate the reader, rather than establish a network of likeminded poets. \textit{Jury Vet} would be followed by \textit{Ranter}: MacSweeney's response to the much sparser avant-garde scene of the 80s, and a blatant attempt to gain a bigger publisher.\textsuperscript{75} Nevertheless, while Mottram's editorship lasted, MacSweeney would have felt in the midst of exciting developments in the poetry world that would have bolstered his denial: 'A fresh atmosphere came over the society: poets found a central forum to discuss and read work on a regular basis... The society became a lively home.'\textsuperscript{76}

Arts Council interference, stemming mainly from Literature Director Charles Osborne, accompanied the Revival's presence in the Poetry Society from the beginning. The Arts Council was set up by Royal Charter in 1946 as a Quango; therefore neither Officers nor Committee members were elected: 'In practice, Charles Osborne has absolute control over every decision on how to allocate public money in the field of literature. ...he has used his position to further a small group of associates and practitioners, and to exclude those categories of literature and those individuals of whom he does not personally approve.'\textsuperscript{77} Thus, Peter Hodgkiss, editor of \textit{Poetry Information}, the leading magazine for Revival poetry, was told he would not receive a grant unless he 'radically changed the style and content of the magazine', whereas Ian Hamilton's \textit{The New Review} received £12,500 'towards the launching cost' (ie. in the year before it began to publish).\textsuperscript{78}

Osborne's attitude to Mottram's editorship of \textit{Poetry Review} was clear. Mottram reports: 'The Arts Council refused any grant whatsoever while Eric Mottram was editor, but promised "a special grant – at the end of the present editor's tenure" – an example of the non-democratic Art Council's attempting to dictate to a democratically elected body, The Poetry

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Poetry South East}, p.34
\textsuperscript{75} MacSweeney sent the manuscript of \textit{Ranter} to Faber, Bloodaxe and even Hutchinson.
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Poetry South East}, p.44
\textsuperscript{78} See 'The British Poetry Revival 1960-1975'.

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Society Council'. In Osborne, Mottram found his opposite number. Here was a man who signed himself 'chief undertaker and literature director, The Arts Council; who, having been reported in the Times as describing the Poetry Society as 'that ragbag down in Earls Court', telephoned the Society to explain that it should have read 'those rat-bags down in Earls Court.' As Peter Barry writes:

Both [Osborne and Mottram] were poets with a parallel professional life as (respectively) a civil servant and an academic. Both were persuasive and charismatic figures, both temperamentally inclined to a certain intellectual arrogance and impatience. The fierceness and bitterness of the struggle in the 1970s was partly due to this head-on clash between two powerful and influential figures both accustomed to persuading others that they were right.

Mottram notes Osborne’s reaction to the Revival poets’ decision to change the Poetry Society’s policy and magazine:

Osborne insisted on trying to nominate three members to The Poetry Society’s Council in order to redress the balance of power. When it was pointed out that this was contrary to The Poetry Society’s constitution and probably to the Arts Council’s Charter as well, Osborne climbed down, but not before he had threatened to cut off The Poetry Society’s grant in mid-year.

The infamous clashes between the Arts Council and the Poetry Society should not blind us to the tensions within the Society itself: Revival poets were not welcomed by the conservative members, who pressed Osborne for the Arts Council Committee enquiry that led to the Witt Report; and as tensions between the Poetry Society and the Arts Council increased, so did tensions within the Revival camp. Following the bitterly disputed acceptance of the Witt report, a range of opinions were voiced about what the next step should be, with Bob Cobbing and Lee Harwood at either extreme. Cobbing was the most trenchant critic of the Arts Council, whereas Harwood favoured a more conciliatory
approach, based on changing the Poetry Society from within, even if this involved accepting a few compromises along the way.  

Mottram equated Harwood’s pragmatism with betrayal – and so far MacSweeney had followed a Mottramite line – however, although editor of Poetry Review, Mottram was also a full-time academic and hence always removed from the day-to-day running of the Poetry Society. By 1976 Mottram was especially distanced from events, as his tenure as editor was coming to an end and his mother had recently died: Peter Barry questions whether Mottram was even aware of MacSweeney’s appointment as Chairman, as he did not attend the meeting on 5.12.76 at which MacSweeney was voted in with nine votes (the conservative Alasdair Aston received six, Ian Robinson received five):

At this stage there was little that could usefully be said, and the voting figures make it clear that the election of a radical Chairman is merely a gesture, since the combined strength of the anti-radicals would ensure that no business which advanced the radical cause was likely to be passed. Hence, the scene was set for the staged and ritualistic walk-out of the radicals which would take place at the General Council meeting in March 1977.

The Chairman now had to state his position and, in Mottram’s absence, Harwood managed to persuade MacSweeney (along with Roy Fisher, Elaine Randell, Roger Guadalla, Ken Smith and others) to continue at the Poetry Society after the acceptance of the Witt report. MacSweeney later regretted this, writing to Mottram: ‘I will be resigning from the Council – as I say, I’ve done too much compromising and my skull won’t take any more. By a fatal error, I accepted what Lee had to say about his meeting with Roy Shaw [on 2.12.76] – that we cd “take the money and run”’. Here, MacSweeney falls back into line with Mottram, while insisting on personal reasons for resigning (‘my skull won’t take any more’). Like many passionate characters, MacSweeney was sometimes ruled by his anger and more easily swayed than perhaps he realised. He vacillates between positions, becoming angry with himself at any sign of compromise. Peter Barry notes that ‘nobody who knew MacSweeney would imagine him temperamentally capable of following a conciliatory Lee Harwood line for long.... Presumably, MacSweeney’s advice at that crucial pre-meeting [a few hours

85 Harwood points out that the Poetry Society must be accountable for its use of public money; that Arts Council pressure is explicable in terms of an overall reduction in the Arts budget; and that John Witt had apologised for his use of the word ‘control’.
86 Poetry Wars, p.92
87 Barry MacSweeney, quoted in Poetry Wars, p.96
before the mass-resignation] was to recommend that there should be a mass resignation and walk-out on that day". 88

The walk-out on 26.3.77 was planned to coincide with the Arts Council's (presumed) rejection of the Poetry Society's proposed candidate for editor of Poetry Review, but as Peter Barry describes 'in the event, MacSweeney's impatience and the tension of the atmosphere, led to his making his own departure early, and the radicals then followed, but somewhat raggedly because of this deviation from the plan'. 89 Ken Smith concedes that 'Tactically MacSweeney forgot himself, and led the walkout before the editorship of the Poetry Review had come up. That was daft, but then, they'd have overturned it anyway'. 90 The shambolic nature of the walk-out was cited as evidence 91 that the mass-resignation was an unplanned act of petulance, and did the group no favours. The incident was reported in the Guardian as follows:

The initial sticking-point was apparently whether a desk and chair should be provided for the secretary of the Association of Little Presses at Earls Court Square. 'It was really a matter of great principle,' said Mr McSweeney [sic] (Chairman of the Poetry Society). 'I discovered after instructing the General Secretary to do this four or five weeks ago that it still hadn't been done. There was an argument...'. 92

MacSweeney's remarks have clearly been fabricated: we hear something closer to his characteristic Catherine-wheel of anger in the actual minutes of the meeting:

Chair's report: Chair wished it to be minuted that he intended to resign as Chairman and as a member of the General Council at the conclusion of this meeting because the Council was fragmented and was too big and unwieldy; an attitude of distrust had been in evidence over the past several weeks in which confidences had been broken, most Council members were unacquainted with the rules of order for holding meetings, there were certain Council members he considered to be 5th Columnists in that threats of persecution were made in respect of acts undertaken in good faith by officers; decisions of the Council and Executive were not being adhered to; he had no confidence in the Poetry Society; he felt that approval of the Arts Council report had been a mistake, and he was no longer willing to compromise his principles... 93

88 Poetry Wars, p.96
89 Poetry Wars, p.101
90 Ken Smith quoted in Poetry Wars, p.100-101
92 Quoted in Poetry Wars, p.99
93 Quoted in Poetry Wars, p.97
This is unstructured and near-hysterical: MacSweeney buries the key factor (the adoption of the Witt report) at the end of his list of complaints instead of foregrounding it, and appears to be speaking for himself rather than as the Chairman of a group. There is an obvious parallel between MacSweeney's behaviour as Chairman and his 70s poetry: both find him switching between collectivist and individualist impulses. In a more considered and evidently pre-meditated press release dated 26 March 1977, the fourteen poets who had walked out stated "The [Poetry Society] Council is no longer in control of Society policy. Policy is being controlled by the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Society's paid staff". Roy Fisher and Lee Harwood stayed on, hoping to work some compromises, but later resigned.

This is a pivotal moment in MacSweeney's career: less than ten years after his Oxford Chair experience, MacSweeney willingly captains a sinking ship, linking his name to what he knows will be another public defeat. The fall-out from the Poetry Society Takeover was not so catastrophic, partly because this time around MacSweeney had not invested so much in the struggle (as I will discuss in Chapter Three, MacSweeney was spending more time on his NUJ work). Nevertheless, as he had in 1969, MacSweeney reacted to the defeat with a violent switch in style designed to alienate his readers: Jury Vet. This would be followed by a more considered planning of his next quest in Ranter.

An Unknown Legend in His Own Time: Odes (1978)

Odes is a continuation of MacSweeney's spikey, conflicted poetry of denial. At first, it appears to be a declaration of allegiance with various kinds of alternative, unofficial poetry: for example, it advertises the influence of Jim Morrison, Michael McClure and Jeremy Prynne. But the individualist streak that runs through all the best of MacSweeney's 70s poetry will not allow him to fall into line with any school, and the reader comes to see that MacSweeney has chosen his antecedents for their antithetical qualities. MacSweeney's self-assertion accounts for the collection's success, and this is what he will carry forward from this period.

The thirty five poems collected in *Odes* were written between 1971 and 1978. Selections were published by Transgravity Advertiser in 1972 and Ted Cavanagh Books in 1973. Although the poems are in a sense united by their obliqueness, the title of the collection raises expectations of a uniformity of approach that the poems do not bear out. Parity is also implied by the way most of the poems use a centre-justified line of varying length and are headed by arbitrary titles that include the word 'ode:' so although 'Disease Ode Carrot Hair' and 'Ode Grey Rose' are as different from one another as anything MacSweeney wrote, their titles are interchangeable and they look very similar on the page. None of the poems are odes as such. In this, MacSweeney may have been influenced by Basil Bunting, who also used the technical term 'ode' as a marker from which to deviate; though MacSweeney's *Odes* bear no stylistic resemblance to Bunting's work. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an ode as follows:

1. a. In early use (esp. with reference to ancient literature): a poem intended to be sung or one written in a form originally used for sung performance (e.g. the Odes of Pindar, of Horace, etc.). Cf. *choral odes* s.v. CHORAL a.¹ b. Later: a lyric poem, typically one in the form of an address to a particular subject, written in varied or irregular metre.

These are not especially musical poems, and as MacSweeney conceded, they are too complex to work well in performance; however, if they are not in themselves song-like, the *Odes* are concerned with singers: both the role of the poet's empirical self (as the singer of these poems) and the role of the singer/rock star in contemporary culture. Most of the poems either concern rock stars or are self-portraits of the poet as though he were a rock star: a development of *Just 22.*

*Odes* is not divided into sections, but we can identify several distinct strands of influence. Five of the poems are named after a figure from pop culture or literature (Morrison, Chatterton, Mia Farrow and Swedenborg) but, as in the case of *Brother Wolf,* titles that promise identification usually bear a teasingly oblique relation to their poems, due to the poet's idiosyncratic associations: thus, while Jim Morrison is referenced in several *Odes,* he does not appear in 'Jim Morrison Ode'. Likewise, the two poems called 'Chatterton Ode' make only indirect references to Chatterton, who is given a more straightforward consideration in 'Ode:Resolution'. A further five poems actually depict such hero-figures in a

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*Poetry Information*, p.37
relatively straightforward manner. Only three poems are really cryptic: 'Ode (Urals postmaster)', 'Dream Graffiti' and 'Ode Long Kesh'. These appear to have been inspired by music or postcards, so their obscurity is due to their reliance on extraneous stimuli. The remaining twenty two poems in Odes are about the poet's relationships with women; most concern sexual exploits. These poems appear obscure at first because they contain many private references, or enact a post-coital moment in which half-formed thoughts dawn on the synapses:

Dance without
moving
an inch.

Kiss me.

Cut grass
& urine.

You are awake.
I love you.

What a mouth.96

The fact that MacSweeney always has a subject matter (even if it is couched in inscrutably private references) distinguishes him from more experimental, non-referential poets. Subject matter, like the appellation 'biography' or 'ode', provides MacSweeney with a marker from which he can swerve. This suggests that the difficulties in the text are willed, and that MacSweeney swerves away from what might have been a more straightforward poem (I will explore this at the end of this chapter in my comparison of two poems about John Everett).

Writing of the collection's obscurity, Robert Sheppard claims that in Odes MacSweeney 'attempts to make a potential reader more acutely responsive to his language'.97 This is vague enough to be applicable to any obscure piece of writing. It would be truer to say that Odes attempts to make a potential reader more acutely responsive to MacSweeney's bedroom. Andrew Duncan has a more suggestive explanation:

96 'Vixen Head/What Small Hands', p.54
The sometime loss of lucidity of these poems is not due to experimentalism but to their reliance on pre-existing stories; the poem transcends the magazine stories by being more allusive and less literal. Much of Odes is about Barry, and here again the lack of obviousness is like a magazine: the hero is cool, is engaged in leisure activities (mainly sexual), and not in bound logical action. The various acts are liberated and casual, like the object symbols of the good life piled up in an advertising photograph or an album sleeve. They are under-specified because they are over-specified.98

Odes is the self-promotion of an unknown legend: if we are confused it is because we are not familiar with the mythology, conventions and catchphrases. While some of the poems in Odes are critical of the solipsism and self-indulgence of rock-stars such as Jim Morrison, others enact it by remaining private and inscrutable.

MacSweeney had established a persona and a set of themes in 'The Last Bud', Brother Wolf and Just 22; and Odes finds him playing up to this self-image. But if MacSweeney had found his subject matter in those earlier poems, he had also effectively dissolved his voice. Odes shows that MacSweeney continued to rely on other texts to an extent that suggests a persistent lack of confidence. Similarly, for all their radicalism, the Odes' depiction of sexuality employs the traditional dichotomy of rising up and active = male, versus reclining and acted-upon = female; and many symbols, such as snake and wolf for predatory male sexuality, are equally conventional. Nevertheless, advances have been made: while MacSweeney's literary influences are foregrounded to the same extent as they were in Cabaret, they are now held up to criticism, or paired with another, antithetical antecedent; this means that whereas Cabaret tended toward pastiche, Odes tends toward parody.

Odes develops the motif of the two fathers, by taking two oppositional models and signposting them clearly: so Michael McClure's lay-out might be mixed with Jim Morrison's attitude and/or Jeremy Prynne's language. Consider 'Viper Suck Ode':

After copulation
Tyger
turns upon her
sexy mate
claws unsheathed.

98 Andrew Duncan, 'The mythical history of Northumbria; or, feathered slave to unreasonable demands: Barry MacSweeney (1948-2000)', Poetry Salzburg No.1, p.133
F*ck snot
gleams her open
jaw.

Mate lies
down.

You cannot petition
the Lord
with prayer.

That's right
Jim.

But
you
took an early
Bath
when a Shower
wd
have Done.99

The reader needs to realise that 'Jim' refers to 'Jim Morrison' in order to understand that 'Viper Suck Ode' is quietly admonishing Jim Morrison's self-destructive tendencies, so it helps if the reader spots the quotation from 'The Soft Parade' ('You cannot petition the Lord with prayer') or knows that MacSweeney is Morrison's self-declared official poetical biographer. The opening invocation of vipers and tigers alludes to Morrison's lyrics and poetry, which include many references to such creatures, and Morrison is particularly associated with the snake (just as Michael McClure identified the lion as his totem animal - see below). These lines are also found in 'The Soft Parade':

...cobra on my left,
Leopard on my right,
The deer woman in a silk dress, girls with beads around their necks
Kiss the hunter of the green vest, who has wrestled before
With lions in the night...

99 ‘Viper Suck Ode’, p.62
100 ‘The Soft Parade’, The Soft Parade, The Doors (Elektra/Asylum, 1969)
'Who Do You Love'\textsuperscript{102} (the Bo Diddley song covered by The Doors which provided MacSweeney with the line 'just twenty two and I don't mind dying') also includes a reference to wearing a 'cobra for a necktie'. MacSweeney begins his poem with a sexy Tyger, but ends it with the domestic image of a bath and shower, in an attempt to deflate Morrison's 'visionary' lyrics.

MacSweeney's projection of himself as the hero of \textit{Odes} shows the influence of Michael McClure, a Beat poet who became a prominent figure in 60s counter-culture. McClure was friends with Jim Morrison, and helped him publish his first book of poems, \textit{The Lords}. McClure also wrote songs (he is responsible for Janis Joplin's 'Mercedes Benz') and in 1987 he recorded an album with Ray Manzarek, the first of several such collaborations. Taking 'OCTOBER FIFTH' as a random example, we find many shared characteristics with 'Viper Suck Ode', including an address to a dead rock star, cryptic leaps of association and an eschewal of sustained syntax:

\begin{quote}
BEAUTIFUL FLESH-COLORED DAHLIAS
IN THE MORNING!
JANIS JOPLIN IS GONE!
Today is the festival of Departed Ancestors.
You were the coruscating star.
Big Brother danced like mad geniuses,
electronic Rimbauds,
and Amerindians. Then,

like everyone else, you became mad
with arrogance.

What do we have but that?
And song so meaningless it is
silence.
The delicate fruit we eat
is the food of war
-AS
YOUR
SPIRIT
IS.
It is all O.K. now
where you are.\textsuperscript{103}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{102} 'Who Do You Love', Bo Diddley (Elias McDaniel), covered by The Doors on \textit{Absolutely Live} (Elektra/Asylum, 1970)

\textsuperscript{103} Michael McClure, 'OCTOBER FIFTH', \textit{September Blackberries} (New York: New Directions, 1974) p.50
The most obvious shared characteristic is the centre-justified line. Bill Griffiths once told me how exotic McClure’s poems appeared in the 60s and 70s, because of the relative difficulty and expense of typesetting his lines, and this formal prestige-signifier would have attracted MacSweeney. Ron Silliman notes: ‘To center [sic] his poems on the page, Michael McClure (and along the way a volunteer typist or two) had to count out the characters in every line and count backwards from the center [sic] space. Today, that’s a simple Control-C in Microsoft Word, so simple in fact that the practice appears to have declined in recent years.’\textsuperscript{104} However, McClure’s lines appear to explode joyously out from a reactive centre; and the inference is that the speaker is likewise centre-justified, like a capital letter ‘I’, or an aerial transmitter, or (at a push) an erect penis. MacSweeney’s lines have a quite different effect, often appearing hemmed-in by all of that white space around them, as though they had collapsed in on themselves; or like (at a push) a limp sock on a washing line:

\begin{quote}
(We
met for lunch
in secret
Soho
squares.)\textsuperscript{105}
\end{quote}

Here, MacSweeney makes a private reference to the early days of his relationship with Elaine Randell: in May 1971, while MacSweeney was still in a relationship with Vivienne Carlton, they would meet in Soho Square. He has also used McClure’s form to break up a line of iambic pentameter, something that would be anathema to McClure, and more reminiscent of the Liverpool poets.

Jeremy Prynne pops up in ‘Snake Paint Sky’, in which MacSweeney appears to conflate him with the Lizard King. Only MacSweeney would do this:

\begin{quote}
beaming Anaconda of parthian monumentalism your
votes gloss acidly these white stone derivations
I’m forever in excess to...\textsuperscript{106}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{104} Silliman’s Blog, 9.5.06, http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/
\textsuperscript{105} ‘Real Ode’, p.63
\textsuperscript{106} ‘Snake Paint Sky’, p.45
Later in this poem, MacSweeney refers more explicitly to his debt to Prynne's poetic technique:

confluence
deferences
electrically
bridled

These lines refer to Prynne's eclectic engagement with scientific and other theoretical discourses in collections such as *The White Stones* and *Brass*. By drawing on such various source materials, Prynne was not hoping to reach an ideally informed readership that could assimilate every reference; rather, he sought to draw attention to the political exclusions of any single, unified point of view. By contrast, the conjunction of pop heroes and an obscurity that would alienate a mass audience reflects MacSweeney's commitment to just such an informed readership, a 'hard core' of readers whom he expected to spot the references. Although Prynne at first appears as a tutelary presence in the language (e.g. 'but clank another point to the maquis, altar on the offside, together by the feminine time'), the differences are telling, and Robert Sheppard has noted that *Odes* 'lacks the sophisticated smoothness of tone associated with much Cambridge poetry'. This 'lack' is not necessarily a negative: MacSweeney's 'voice' was now to be found in the jagged shifts of register, in the cracks that open up between discourses. While he took his poetic bearings at this time from the avant-garde, he was engaged in a creative misreading of their poetics, and had his own priorities.

Another reason why MacSweeney's 70s poetry is so cryptic is that he was using it to indirectly express his conflicted feelings about his marriage. In August 1971 MacSweeney left Vivienne Carlton for Elaine Randell. He later described himself at this time as 'a tremendously unsuccessful and unhappily ugly human being'. The relationship was volatile. Many of Randell's letters express concern over MacSweeney drinking too much and eating too little; he appears prone to fits of rage and callous unreasonableness, and seems worried that she will become pregnant in order to trap him. Randell's letters to MacSweeney

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107 Ibid.
108 I thank Peter Riley for pointing this out. He quoted these lines from 'Ode (Urals postmaster...)' 109 Sheppard, p.14
110 Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
at this time repeatedly ask for reassurance that MacSweeney is not involved or still in love with Vivienne Carlton (at his readings, MacSweeney still dedicates poems to Carlton). MacSweeney complains of feeling stifled, and behaves pettily, particularly over money, blaming their financial problems on her eating too much, rather than his growing dependency on alcohol. By August 1973 they are spending time apart.

'Ode' and 'Ode to the Unborn' were written in the turbulent early years of MacSweeney's relationship with Elaine Randell. Both poems try and fail to confront the subject of Vivienne Carlton's abortion. The former begins 'Urals postmaster, this is your/ dead child!' before swerving off into one of MacSweeney's most cryptic poems. It is followed by 'Ode to the Unborn', which begins 'Her name was Bonney and though she wasn't registered/ she bored a hole through his idiot iron heart'. At this point, the poem likewise changes subject matter. The phrase 'she wasn't registered' obviously refers to the way MacSweeney cannot consider himself a father (this was an abortion rather than a stillbirth); but also to the fact that he failed to register how traumatic this incident would be for him. A more practical reason for the poems' obscurity is that MacSweeney had misled Randell, telling her that Carlton had chosen to have an abortion, that he was not the father, and that her decision had made him feel sad. Finally, in a letter dated 19.10.72, Randell asks MacSweeney whether the aborted child was his, and whether he persuaded Carlton to have the termination.

An image of the pressure cooker MacSweeney and Randell constructed for each other appears in one of Randell's letters, in which she describes watching MacSweeney write one of the Odes. Stealing a peek when MacSweeney leaves the room, she interprets the poem as a veiled wish to end the relationship. Instead of confronting MacSweeney, Randell writes him a letter. Since MacSweeney and Randell required regular periods of separation, written communication was particularly important to them: MacSweeney left the draft where Randell might read it, so his coy saying/not-saying was intentional, and we see the same instinct at work in the poetry he was writing at the time. For example, 'Real Ode' begins by describing a 'you' standing next to a moat, and ends with the words 'Ghastly/ sight'.

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111 'Ode', p.43
112 'Ode to the Unborn', p.44
113 Archive: BM 17/11/21. See Elaine Randell's letter dated 19.10.72
114 Archive: BM 17/11/18. Elaine's letter is sealed in an envelope marked 'letter to be read on the train'.
115 'Real Ode'. All subsequent quotations of this poem come from pp.63-65
evokes the traditional folk song ‘Down in the Willow Garden’, in which the (male) singer murders his lover: ‘I threw her in the river./ It was a ghastly sight’. The reference to a ‘Swan’ links the moat imagery with the poet, since Swan was one of MacSweeney’s many nicknames. The clothes imagery of ‘Tangerine/ frock/ hugs pleated/ folds...’ looks forward to Jury Vet, though the tangerine returns in the second section: ‘Two/ of us/ in segments. // Pips’. This glances at MacNeice’s lines: ‘I peel and portion/ A tangerine and spit the pips and feel/ The drunkenness of things being various’. Alcoholism is thus subliminally acknowledged as a reason for the couple’s separation.

The third section of ‘Real Ode’ returns us to images of drowning in the moat:

Parboiled,
we sink in the dreadful
ful
moat.

It is a mote
in our
Eyes

no surprise.117

The weak play on moat/mote, only partially excused by the disclaimer ‘no surprise’, shows MacSweeney’s continuing difficulty in establishing terms with the reader; more importantly, it obscures another reference to Dante’s Inferno.118 After this, the mote in the speaker’s eyes leads to ‘Skull/-crushing crystals’: he identifies himself with Fraud in Shelley’s The Mask of Anarchy, whose tears are huge gems that crush children’s skulls.119 The allusion to Shelley’s most political poem obscures the emotional impulse behind the poem: the speaker is crying with self-loathing. Having fantasised about murdering his loved-one and a child, and the infernal retribution that would follow, the speaker swerves into a touching mix of fastidious protectiveness and defensive trivia, telling his (now ex-) lover to wear her seatbelt and fix the rear headlight of her car. In doing so, the poem ends with a naturalistic observation, a touching moment that has been authorised by its elaborate and cryptic raid on MacSweeney’s

117 ‘Real Ode’, p.65
118 The ‘dreadful moat’ is a reference to the Styx, in which Dante sees Filippo Argenti in Canto 8 of Inferno. MacSweeney refers to this Canto in ‘The Last Bud’.
library, LP collection and political opinions. ‘Real Ode’ occupies a similar position to ‘The Last Bud’, with its encoded rehearsal of a break-up that MacSweeney hoped would be decoded and enacted in the life.

Upon the publication of his *Poetry Information* interview, in October 1977, MacSweeney added a note about his current work, in which he explains that he is now writing in two distinct styles: ‘linear’ and ‘nodal’. He boasts: ‘I have managed to put myself in the position of working in both areas.’ We can gauge the extent to which *Odes* constitutes a radical departure from MacSweeney’s more straightforward writing by comparing two contemporaneous poems that deal with the same subject matter: ‘Ode White sail’, and ‘Homage to John Everett, Marine Painter, 1876-1949’. Both poems concern John Everett: an astonishingly prolific painter, whose financial self-reliance (he worked all of his life on the last sailing ships and then on steam ships) allowed him to maintain a distance from his contemporaries and academic fashions in painting. Despite this, Everett was receptive to modernism: his work begins in a decidedly nineteenth-century pictorial tradition, but learns from the avant-garde of the day, moving towards abstract patterns based on wave formations and seascapes. There are few human figures in Everett’s work, and when they do appear they are usually engaged in solitary work: sailing (and, by implication, art) was an individual quest; Everett was not interested in team work. Once again, MacSweeney identifies as much with the artist as the art.

‘Homage to John Everett, Marine Painter, 1876-1949’ was written and published in 1973, first appearing in *Poetry Review* 64/2 (Summer 1973), but remaining uncollected until it was reprinted in *Wolf Tongue*. With uncharacteristic restraint and concision, ‘Homage’ records an enthusiasm for Everett’s paintings: the speaker likes them ‘better than anything else/ in the museum’. We are not told why the speaker likes them, just as we are not told the contents of the letter he receives in the third stanza:

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a letter arrives
it is very happy
but the last line is sad
and there is a p.s.
apologising for it
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120 *Poetry Information*, p.39
121 ‘Homage to John Everett, Marine Painter, 1876-1949’, p.33
There is a pervasive sense of melancholy: Everett is 'out of fashion', the speaker's interest is a lonely obsession, the letter ends sadly, and the perspective of Everett's paintings is that of

a man shipwrecked
clinging to flotsam

'Homage' is a linear poem with a stable tone and a conversational idiom. The speaker appears to be MacSweeney himself. Rather than signifying avant-garde sympathies, the lower-case lettering and absence of punctuation give the poem the appearance of having been jotted down quickly and informally; though this is off-set by the measured free verse, suggesting Robert Creeley's influence.

None of these characteristics are present in 'Ode White Sail'. Here, the speaker is all but effaced, and the poem recedes in its final lines to bare nouns: 'Rum./Tough biscuits./Brine.' The short, clipped lines are strenuous in their brevity:

Sombreros tilt
in horse latitudes,
hands sew
thick thread.

The poem is also more allusive: 'Horse Latitudes' is a Jim Morrison poem recorded by The Doors. However, the similarities between the poems are more telling. Both poems praise Everett's practice of painting directly onto sailcloth, stressing the importance of witness and speedy responsiveness: 'the only painter/to watch and portray/the last years of the sailing ship'. There is also a shared sense of privacy in the way both poems depict a personal talisman while making minimal effort to enable access to a general reader. Both poems would be clearer if we had access to external signifiers: the letter in 'Homage' or the painting/s described in 'Ode White Sail'.

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122 Ibid. p.33
123 'Ode White Sail', p.59
124 Ibid., White Sail', p.59
125 'Horse Latitudes', Strange Days, The Doors, (Elektra/Asylum, 1967)
126 'Homage to John Everett, Marine Painter, 1876-1949', p.34
We know that the difficulty of *Odes* troubled MacSweeney because he wrote an explicatory note for the Trigram publication, but was dissuaded from publishing it by Trigram's editor, Asa Benveniste. 'Homage' demonstrates that MacSweeney continued to write more linear poetry during this time. As an illustration of the necessary duality – of the artist's wish to both reveal and conceal themselves – 'Homage' contrasts the two known portraits of Everett. The self-portrait is painted in bright colours and shows the artist posing with the traditional accoutrements of clay pipe and ragged straw hat. In the other portrait, painted by an unnamed friend and contemporary, Everett is depicted as a villain, in top hat, black opera cloak and pointed beard. Like the two poems MacSweeney dedicates to Everett, the portraits differ significantly, but share a common subject matter, theatricality, interest in public/private personas and a concern with playing out the role of artist.

MacSweeney's self portrayal in *Odes* is characterised by a mixture of self-projection and self-disguise, and this will be true of all his subsequent self-depictions. The effect resembles the performance an actor might give after he has become a 'star', that is, when his private life has become as important as what we see on-screen. Colin MacArthur explains how the star myth takes root when an actor becomes emblematic of particular emotional states:

Men such as Cagney, Robinson and Bogart seem to gather within themselves the qualities of the genres they appear in so that the violence, suffering and angst of the films is restated in their faces, physical presence, movement and speech... each successive appearance in the genre further solidifies the actor's screen persona until he no longer plays a role but assimilates it to the collective entity made up of his own body and personality and his past screen roles.\(^{127}\)

Bogart's screen persona is reminiscent of MacSweeney's tendency to accrete characteristics from his various styles and modes. MacSweeney begins this process in the 70s, and by the time we meet the speaker of *Demons*, he is a composite figure, cobbled together from previous incarnations.

Copying the 'look' of movie stars is a form of cultural production and consumption in which your construction as spectator, consumer and producer overlap. MacSweeney always

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had an eye for the latest must-have item. Gordon Burn described MacSweeney as a young mod, with a distinctive fashion sense from an early age:

He was a mod. That much I can say for sure. Four-button Madras jackets, buttoned high; Ben Sherman shirts, Sta-Prest parallel trousers that in Newcastle at that time were known as "parallels" or "strides". There was a vogue for wearing desert boots that started around 1963 or 1964, and a way of walking that involved spinning an invisible stone away with the outside of the left foot, and then the right. [...] He had the walk: head down, toes in, haversack slung by a single strap over one shoulder, school tie tied at the skinny end to make a hard, nut-sized knot. He was a face. He had that hair.\textsuperscript{128}

Stars may also be identified with particular commodities—a Brando leather jacket or a Billy Fury motorbike—and the cosmetics industry has long used images of the stars to advertise its products ("Lux is the soap of the stars!"). Although his instinct was not infallible, and his method was far from economical, MacSweeney was always quick to spot such accoutrements. As a poet, he progressed by instinctively taking up new voices and styles, rewriting (and frequently improving) his more intellectual peers.

MacSweeney's remarkable receptivity to new forms and styles is one of his strengths as a poet, but it was not always matched by his ability to digest and integrate his discoveries. I do not necessarily see this as a shortcoming. When he uses avant-garde techniques to encrypt autobiographical concerns, the resulting combination of highly emotive personal symbolism and obscuring avant-garde techniques is more interesting than anything a more thoroughgoing disciple of Olson, Prynne or McClure could have produced. The individualist impulse that prevented MacSweeney from falling fully into line with any poetic movement led to his most successful poetry in the 70s. In Chapter Three, I will consider the less successful poetry MacSweeney was also writing at this time: \textit{Black Torch} pledged allegiance to a regional literary grouping in a more straightforward manner, and conformed to collectivist narratives of social history. Like other contemporaneous political poems such as 'Colonel B', it fails because it is too directed.

\textsuperscript{128} Gordon Burn, 'Message in a Bottle', \textit{Guardian}, 1.6.00
Chapter Three: Every Day I Write the Book: 1965 - 1983

In this chapter I examine the pivotal moment in 1978 when MacSweeney's denial gives way to anger. This change occurs within the context of MacSweeney's political writing, and I begin by offering a survey of MacSweeney's political sympathies up to this point. As I will show, the political ethos of his poetry continually switched between a Socialist, collectivist impulse for solidarity, and a Protestant individualist impulse in which the persona embodies political conflicts rather than comments on them. In 1978, this individualist/collectivist dialectic led MacSweeney to produce two very different books: *Odes* is a self-referential volume that both exhibits and critiques the individualism of strong poets (Prynne, McClure) and rock-stars (Jim Morrison); by contrast, *Black Torch* documents the proto-Socialist struggles of mining communities in the 1840s. It is dedicated to lesser poets (Mottram and Pickard) and exhibits MacSweeney's wish to be accepted by a group. I will also look at the positive and negative impact journalism made on MacSweeney's poetry.

Politics and Journalism 1965 – 1979

When MacSweeney ventures onto openly political ground, the results are usually disastrous. In the preface to *Cabaret*, MacSweeney says he 'wants to see poets get away from revisionism'. What could this mean? It means MacSweeney doesn't know what revisionism is:

> What do you mean by getting away from revisionism? I thought the British Communist Party was revisionist in 1968.

The what? Yes it was. Exactly.

> Are you saying you're a Maoist?

No, I'm saying I'm a non-Stalinist.

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But de-Stalinization is revisionism. That's what revisionism meant.

Well, perhaps I'm just ignorant. No, Andrew, that's ridiculous. What I mean is: I want to get away from non-revolutionary art. OK? Got that?²

Such attitudinising raises what will become a familiar question: to what extent is MacSweeney producing and promoting a political context for his work, and to what extent is he a consumer, or victim, of it?

We know that MacSweeney's working class background was one source of the fury at his nomination for the Oxford Poetry chair; however, a few flirtations with radical positions aside, the political dimension of Cabaret is indistinguishable from that of the Liverpool poets: plain-spoken, simple-minded poetry was seen as an anti-literary, anti-middle-class gesture. At the time, MacSweeney liked to connect this to his journalism: 'Reporting gave me a sense of what words could be: economy and just get down the needed things, with no frills.'³ Economy is not a quality we associate with MacSweeney, who is nothing if not frilly. However, Cabaret's most successful poem is its most pared down: 'On The Burning Down of the Salvation Army Mens Palace, Dog's Bank, Newcastle.' This poem is taken directly from MacSweeney's experience as a cub reporter and is written in a restrained social-realist mode. Lucie-Smith selected it for his anthology, and in consequence MacSweeney always valued it, including it in Wolf Tongue (one of only two Cabaret poems he chose to re-print). Here are the closing lines:

We looked at the scorched wood and remarked
how much it resembled a burnt body later we
heard it was a charred corpse
we remarked how much it resembled burnt-out timber.⁴

The deadpan, unshockable tone is affecting because it is authentic: the 'we' is a group of jaded journalists, and the poem, rather than a pastiche, is rooted in actual, lived experience.

Another reason for the success of ‘On The Burning Down...’ is that it describes alienation from the victim rather than identification. This is an iron law of MacSweeney's

² Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
³ 'The autobiography of Barry MacSweeney', Cabaret, pages unnumbered.
⁴ 'On The Burning Down of the Salvation Army Men's Palace, Dog's Bank, Newcastle', p.14
poetic composition: when he attempts to register solidarity, the result feels contrived. Here he is bonding with some working-class, salt-of-the-earth navvies:

oh fertile architecture that replenished my eye
in dockland, where knotted groups
of pickets shook me as a friend
& grabbed my shoulders bruising me even in
their union strength...  

The paternal aspect of these pickets is clear enough; especially if we remember that a navvie was an Irish itinerant labourer, and that MacSweeney’s father was of Irish descent. The poet’s fantasy of being welcomed into the pickets’ ‘union strength’ is an encoded wish for acceptance from literary father-figures such as Bunting and Prynne. In *Demons*, MacSweeney presents a similar scene of wished-for camaraderie in ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, but here he explicitly links his Socialist impulse for collective identification to his fraught relationship with his father, and stresses the theatricality of the gesture:

But it is not enough to try to find a redundant welder in the Durham Family Practitioner Committee and after angry handshakes and solidarity exchanges at the closure of another worldwide great shipyard that I might in my poetic unappreciated nightmare about you, daddy, ask for flux to weld my utterly broken heart to yours in some kind of common long lost at last agreement. I cannot, daddy, I just cannot.  

The torturous syntax and bizarre imagery prepare us for the inevitable admission of failure, and ‘Daddy Wants to Murder Me’ soon develops into the most nihilistic of individualist political-empowerment fantasies, when the speaker imagines himself as a terrorist in Northern Ireland, on his way to make a house call where he will kill his father.

*Our Mutual Scarlet Boulevard* (1971) registers the immediate shock of the Oxford Chair humiliation: the collection divides into early poems that appeal to the reader as *Cabaret* had done, and later poems that try to alienate the reader. MacSweeney will later use experimental forms to accomplish this. *Boulevard* contains several damning indictments of journalism, opening with an unflattering portrait of MacSweeney’s boss at the *Evening*

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5 ‘Sealine’, *Cabaret*, p.27
6 ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, pp.46-7.
Chronicle in 'On the apology owed Tom Pickard', the publication of which earned MacSweeney the sack:

I want to grow up and be a big shot  
In the newspaper world like you.  
I want to be a News Editor.  
I want to smoke Schimmelpfennig cigars  
And drink double whiskeys with the Daily Mail lads.  
[...]  
I too want to call Tom Pickard 'a long-haired  
Scruffy, parasitic bastard'.  
I want to call Jon Silkin a 'bearded egotist'.  
I want to have a big new shiny red car.  

Shiny red cars took up permanent residence in MacSweeney's symbolic system, standing for decadence and complacency. This is a very early poem (the poem was actually written in 1965 and predates Cabaret), which explains its uncharacteristic declaration of solidarity with another Newcastle poet. It is an imitation of Bunting's 'What the Chairman told Tom', written at a time when MacSweeney still hoped to form a triumvirate with Pickard and Bunting. The poem's dismissal of journalism is more characteristic, and 'The Last Bud' is equally critical of journalism and politics:

Country to me  
means nothing. Politics, entry into  
Europe, which I read everyday as my trade,  
means little, save that for sustenance,  
means of carrying from Monday to Friday  
my flagging body and head.  

When writing well, MacSweeney always denies that there is any significant connection between his political journalism and his lone-wolf poetic persona. Throughout Boulevard, MacSweeney expresses his 'loathing for that lacquered voyeurism waiting/ for us on the

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10 'The Last Bud', p.15
deceitful news-stand. Anyone naïve enough to take part in a political demonstration is excoriated thus:

25,000 diligent-beyond-belief
demonstrators offering a brand-new life
stand with one or two well-known
actresses wearing
redskin headbands and wearing out
certainly excellent shoe leather

singing songs of praise,
singing VENCEREMOS
in Trafalgar Square,
concrete
spittoon
where on saints’ days
dribbles conscientious phlegm,
oozing melodically
in tune with each world tragedy?:

Tragedy: Polaris
Pit Ponies
Greek Junta
Abolition of Bengal
tiger from their tanks;
dribble, dribble,
chanting maggots in chorus

Nobody ever spat for the sainthood of the living.

As John Wilkinson writes, ‘this seems unhinged, explicable only in terms of a pathological need to ensure his own pariah-hood’. It is typical of the individualist strand of Boulevard that is antagonistic towards collectivity of any kind.

I want to look at the way the overtly political poetry MacSweeney wrote in the 70s is symptomatic of his denial in this period. Politics and journalism were important to MacSweeney at this time, because his work as union delegate for the NUJ allowed him to hide from his failing marriage and present a more successful face to the world. Jackie Litherland first met MacSweeney in 1976 at an NUJ meeting in Buxton, where MacSweeney

11 ‘Red ponder’, Boulevard, p.78
12 ‘If you lose your leader don’t lose your cool’, Boulevard, pp.22-23
gave a speech protesting at the low wages paid to junior reporters. The MacSweeney she saw was confident, passionate, theatrical, committed and successful (the vote went in favour of a pay rise). MacSweeney kept his deeply ambivalent feelings about the NUJ hidden from Litherland; likewise his less successful battles with the Arts Council, the growing crisis in his personal life, and his drinking.

MacSweeney’s troubles are clear in a letter from Elaine Randell, written at this time, in which she warns MacSweeney that his drinking was getting out of hand. Remarkably, at this time of crisis in the Poetry Society, Randell warns MacSweeney that he is spending so much time on his NUJ work that he is neglecting his poetry. It appears that MacSweeney turned to alcohol and his NUJ work to avoid facing up to his relationship problems and the crisis in confidence about his poetry. Writing overtly political poetry was another form of denial: he writes Black Torch at this time and, after the failure of his second marriage in 1983, works for six years on the eventually-abandoned political poem ‘No Mercy’.

Black Torch appeared at the same time as Odes in 1978. MacSweeney was thirty years old, but publishing such very different books simultaneously suggests that he was still writing for two fathers: in this case, Jeremy Prynne (the most immediate precursor of Odes) and Eric Mottram (to whom the prologue to Black Torch is dedicated). The books are weighted unevenly: Odes connects with preceding work such as Just 22, and is the culmination of several years’ work, whereas Black Torch has more in common with MacSweeney’s day-job of NUJ delegate than with anything in his poetry. MacSweeney soon grew dissatisfied with Black Torch, and in Wolf Tongue it is represented only by its closing poem, ‘Black Torch Sunrise’. Presumably MacSweeney no longer felt the poem represented a significant strand of his work; but back in 1979 he had this to say:

Interestingly, the new poets are not rock star monetary planets, distant heroes, behind gleaming phalanx of booze-fed bouncer bodyguards. Having eschewed the capitalist/hero author/ system, it was not possible to put up subtle fences between mouth and ear. Organically speaking, they are on the same body. The Christian/ Western religious tradition is fixed on the idea of a single godhead. Given that the new poetry is a socialist/anarchist revolution, the junkie need for a single figure is obliterated.

14 Archive: Box 17. Letter from Elaine Randell to Barry MacSweeney dated 22.5.76. I cannot quote the letter for legal reasons.
16 Poetry South East, p.38
This half-digested Mottramese runs counter to everything we find in MacSweeney's poetry, from the hero-worshipping pastiche of *Cabaret*, through the poetic biography of Jim Morrison, to the rock star attitudinising in *Odes*. MacSweeney has altered the terms in favour of his current project, but as I will show, he soon switched allegiances.

*Black Torch* presents itself as an attempt to shed light on a hidden history and give a voice to the silenced; however, MacSweeney is less interested in 1840s social struggle than in his own literary struggles in the 1970s. Typical of the bad faith and false solidarity that characterise the volume, *Black Torch* is dedicated to Tom Pickard. MacSweeney always had a fraught friendship with Pickard, since Bunting named Pickard as his protégé; and yet, throughout this book, MacSweeney shows un-poetic humility and deference to the favoured son. That MacSweeney wrote *Black Torch* to gain admittance to a group is most apparent in the eponymous second section of *Black Torch*, which consists of many short lyrics spoken by unnamed speakers. I quote the first lyric in full:

```
aah travelled on the dole
sky in Tom and Conny's hair
aah cannit blame Halfden
who gave us fire
after Ida
a loathing for priests
and false fire
furred, gagged, silent
eat calm grass of islands
where fire is intended
before saddles and stirrups
southrons
pagan song drives iron
into your plaid money
you will not recall
black fire-horns
because you have none17
```

This lyric does not relate to the main narrative of this section, and appears to have been included as an afterthought simply to appeal to Tom and Connie Pickard (who are name-checked in line two, with Connie's name tellingly misspelled) and Basil Bunting (Halfden,18

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17 *Black Torch*, p.13
18 MacSweeney follows Bunting in spelling Halfdan's name 'Halfden'.

101
Ida and 'southern's are allusions to Briggflatts). Most of the other lyrics in this section are spoken by striking miners in the 1840s. At their best, these gobbets are capable of conveying pathos:

we pawned the dresser
candlesticks
me wedding ring
the ornaments
everybody has

Nevertheless, the limits of MacSweeney's interest in the historical period can be gauged by the dearth of 'pitmatic' words in these lyrics. Such a greedy and acquisitive reader elsewhere, MacSweeney makes almost no use of pitmatic language, and instead draws his dialect words from 1970s slang. Pitmatic developed in the nineteenth century, when economic migrants from all over Britain and Ireland converged in the North East and found they needed to establish common terms for new industrial equipment and situations. This rich dialect is a social history in itself, but MacSweeney finds almost no use for it.

However genuine his real-life interest in the North East's social history may have been, MacSweeney's adoption of collectivist narratives in Black Torch is a sign of his lack of confidence as a poet. As we have seen, MacSweeney liked to identify himself with beautiful young burn-outs ('I seem to have this thing about James Dean characters who are destined to destroy themselves' and in Chapter Two, I argued that Odes was an example of the hubristic confidence that would eventually lead to MacSweeney's best work: the collection sees him taking on Prynne's language, McClure's forms and Morrison's self-mythologising. But if Odes finds MacSweeney giving himself the star treatment and pretending to be James Dean, Black Torch finds him worrying that he is really Sal Mineo. Mineo was Oscar-nominated for his supporting role in Rebel Without a Cause, and frequently complained that this led to his being overlooked as a lead actor. News of Mineo's death interrupts MacSweeney's long political monologue in 'Black Torch Sunrise':

Mineo dead in Hollywood suburbs
alleys exploded liver burst
muggers' dark blade

19 Black Torch, p.48
20 Poetry Information, p.31
elegiacs & glittering heroes
sour with mediocre filmwork

'There is work and there is art. So far all
I have done is work – you could say
I feel bitter about that'21

Mineo's distinction between art and work must have appealed to MacSweeney. When selecting his work for *The Tempers of Hazard*22, MacSweeney gave all of his post-*Odes* poetry the heading 'Work (1978-86)', suggesting his fundamental dissatisfaction with it.

Mineo appears in the final section of *Black Torch*, 'Black Torch Sunrise', which finds MacSweeney in the 1970s, watching television and thinking about politics. This is the most compelling section of the book, mainly because it contains the strongest hints of the more interesting, self-oriented poetry MacSweeney might have written instead: he expresses disappointment with his poetic career ('parts of the wood/ remain worthy of fire, like a poet/ growing older'23) and his day-job ('I must protect my sources/ to weld Press trivia/ in low-key suburban rags'24). MacSweeney also gets the chance to criticise trade unions and, as we would expect, this individualism enlivens the poem:

Will the Labour party uphold the jailing of pickets?
Of course.
– TUC inner cadres make closed door pacts with the Govt
This allows the £
some relief on the European market25

Here, MacSweeney is voicing an abiding northern cynicism towards the Labour party, which currently manifests itself in the voting-in of Liberal Democrat candidates across the North East. Such attitudes can be explained away in terms of disenfranchisement and distance from the centre of power (as well as the fact that the people most in need of an effective Labour party are liable to be the ones who feel the bitterest sting of betrayal), but either way, they

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21 'Black Torch Sunrise', p.75. Sal Mineo died in 1976, having been stabbed by a mugger.
23 Ibid., p.76
24 Ibid., p.77
25 'Black Torch Sunrise', p.74
make for more interesting poetry than the well-behaved sentiments found elsewhere in *Black Torch*: ‘Real miners/ ripped that coal’.26

I am arguing that MacSweeney's use of social history shows little close engagement, and his remarks on contemporary miners are often complacent and sentimental: his overtly political poetry is part of his quest to appear a certain kind of writer; to control how he is received. To this end, MacSweeney advertised forthcoming further sections to *Black Torch*, including 'Muckraker' (a Lytton Strachey-style expose about T Dan Smith), and a book based on the diaries of the radical Baptist painter John Martin.27 MacSweeney never wrote these poems. Instead, he presented *Blackbird* as book two of *Black Torch*, and then abandoned the project. *Blackbird* is an elegy for his maternal grandfather. The celebration of a working man’s life is in keeping with Marxist principles, but it is not the record of social struggle that MacSweeney intended, suggesting he had lost faith in political solutions and societal accounts of human behaviour, in favour of a return to his individualist, heroic vision of history.

Politics and journalism invariably exerted a negative *thematic* influence on MacSweeney's poetry, but they enhanced his writing in other, indirect ways. In particular, MacSweeney's journalistic responsiveness would prove an invaluable poetic resource in his later work. 'Far Cliff Babylon' shows the way journalism had sensitised MacSweeney's ear to political sloganeering. Here, he lampoons the 16-year-old William Hague’s speech to the Tory national conference in 1977:

I am 16.
I am a Tory. My

vision of the future represents
no people. [...] 

I have no people.
They represent me.

When we go my separate ways
the colours are dark.

No more apartheid. [...] 

26 Ibid., p.77
27 See *Poetry Information*, p.39, where these further sections are advertised.
I represent no people. Not even myself.  

Twenty years later, Hague would live out these prophetic lines when he became leader of the Tory party. In 2001, he embarked on a markedly unsuccessful election campaign, in which he failed to win back Tory voters despite his cynical, xenophobic scaremongering. Isolated within his own party, he resigned the day after the election. MacSweeney's ability to spot a defining moment or a telling quote would find fuller expression in Jury Vet and 'Wild Knitting': these astonishing poems demonstrated how Thatcherism could be aesthetically registered and critiqued, and helped set the terms for innovative poetry in the 80s.

MacSweeney's experience of sub-editing and providing headlines for newspaper copy also influenced his poetry. Commenting on the way many of the poems in Odes appear to have been written in a compressed, garbled tabloidese, Robert Sheppard says: 'It is perhaps too simple to attribute this wholly to MacSweeney's journalistic training, yet we are aware of weird headline-like qualities in the statements: 'Oak-pin/ shells/ survive the/ China Sea' ... Yet it is difficult to imagine a story to match the headline.' Well, quite. The paradoxical image of a surreal headline could stand for MacSweeney's ambiguous gesture in his poems of the 70s. Odes is full of attention-grabbing lines: the attractive phrasing is appealing, even if the meaning remains oblique. Litherland describes MacSweeney noting down poem-titles and connects this to his experience of subbing:

[MacSweeney] would jot down found notices, instructions on labels, remarks from conversation, phrases from books, into a list of possible titles for unwritten poems. He would often interrupt someone speaking by suddenly exclaiming: 'That's a great title.' [...] When Barry worked on the subs' table, his mind was intent on writing great headlines. Outside of the industry it is not appreciated how the subs enjoy the creativity allowed them of writing clever headlines.  

Noting down catchy titles and not listening during conversations are common practice for poets, but Litherland usefully connects them to the fact that in journalism it is often a sub-editor who gives a title to an article the reporter has written. MacSweeney had experience of working either side of this divide.

28 'Far Cliff Babylon', pp.78-81
30 Jackie Litherland interview.
MacSweeney’s next attempt at a political poem was ‘Colonel B’, written after he had attended an NUJ conference where the ‘ABC trial’ was discussed. The ABC Trial was an Official Secrets Act trial in 1978 in which two journalists were placed in a top-security prison accused of researching British signals intelligence. The farcical case was eventually overturned when it emerged that the ‘secret’ information the journalists had uncovered was already in the public domain. The prosecution’s case was based on the supposedly anonymous evidence of three Signals Intelligence officers, known as Colonel A, Colonel B and Mr. C. The officers’ real names were an open secret, though it was technically an infringement of national security for the media to name them; so journalists found various amusing ways of semi-publishing the details, such as writing Colonel B’s real name in huge letters on the beach at Whitley Bay during low tide, as described in MacSweeney’s poem:

Col B’s name

(JOHNSTON) writ large in letters scraped
on Whitley Bay’s famous golden shore.
Where waves roar
inside the cardboard heads
of grey overcoats
with writs to serve. We swerve.31

As in the references to Connie Pickard and Halfdan, MacSweeney misspells the key name (it should read ‘Johnstone’), betraying his underlying lack of interest.

‘Colonel B’ marks an advance in MacSweeney’s use of masks and voices, which place his political complaints in a historical context:

Taj Mahals
of muttshit, people
eating anthrax virus. Horned
fuckdust plugs their eyes.

INHILDE SOMEJOICE OF LYFE, OR ELSE MY DEARE LOVE DIES –
burn yr halles of merriment – burst
yr miskynettes.

Sack the scallywag who brought me to this

31 ‘Colonel B’, p. 90
Here, MacSweeney quotes from Chatterton's 'Elinoure and Juga', transforming Elinoure's cry to her fallen lover into his own cry of despair at the fallen state of the nation. The allusion is finely judged, and its being followed by some unexpectedly humorous lines gives the passage a linguistic texture and a historical depth that enlivens the wearying cut-up reportage that dominates the rest of 'Colonel B'.

'Colonel B' is only a partial success, and reads like a practice-run for the altogether superior 'Wild Knitting', which combines socio-political commentary with a more thoroughgoing honesty and the kind of self-appraisal from which it is difficult to recover. By contrast, 'Colonel B' relies on cannibalising MacSweeney's earlier poems for its content, apparently an extension of the way Odes responded openly to other texts and only cryptically to the poet's own experience. When a poet pours old content into a new form like this, it implies hesitancy; and the suspicion that MacSweeney is holding back from saying what he really thinks will be confirmed when we encounter the unbridled anger and dark glee of 'Wild Knitting', a poem in which the counterpointing of conflicting registers, and the use of historicising quotation, is deployed to far greater effect.

Appended to 'Colonel B' is a note, informing us 'This state of the nation bulletin for J. H. Prynne'. Peter Riley makes an illuminating observation about this dedication:

Prynne encouraged Barry's course towards the violent and obscene poems of around 1980... Barry sent him a copy of 'Colonel B' with a note asking "Have I gone too far this time?" To which Jeremy gleefully replied, "No, not far enough!" as he would, for it was always his habit to push those under his influence to extremes, and it is this extremism rather than any particular stylistic traits which for me mark his influence on Barry.

Although the excesses in 'Colonel B' were still sanctioned by Prynne, MacSweeney was coming to the end of his prolonged apprenticeship, and Prynne would later be offended by MacSweeney's use of intimate personal detail in 'Wild Knitting'.

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32 'Colonel B', p.89
33 See Marianne Morris, 'The Abused Become the Abusers', Quid 14 (October 2004)
34 Peter Riley, email to the author, 28.11.05
35 In her interview, Jackie Litherland said that Prynne admonished MacSweeney for publishing 'Wild Knitting' because he felt it would be painful for Lesley Bourne to read.
The poems that immediately follow 'Colonel B' (*Jury Vet* and 'Wild Knitting') are also driven by political anger, but their success stems from MacSweeney's willingness to harness a more individualist motivation than he allowed himself in *Black Torch*. That poem failed because it was a latecomer: rather than define the terms upon which it had to be read, it relied on pre-existing structures, narratives and literary groupings for its effect. 'Colonel B' was another latecomer, recycling eight-year-old content. Polemic needs to be written with haste, heat and urgency if it is to kindle like emotions in the reader, and MacSweeney's political writing of the 70s was altogether too reasonable. In *Jury Vet* and 'Wild Knitting', by combining polemic with a preacherly, Protestant self-assertion, MacSweeney would find a way to write political poems of immediacy and moment: not declaring solidarity so much as admonishing his flock. These angrily prophetic poems are unstable, and threatened by incoherence and solipsism, but as had *Just 22*, they capture the dynamic spirit before it cools into the dead letter.


*Jury Vet* is the point at which MacSweeney makes the transition from denial to anger. He stops laying a trail of literary-anterior breadcrumbs (as he had in 'The Last Bud' and *Brother Wolf*), he stops courting a small, hardcore audience (as he had in *Just 22* and *Odes*) and he rejects poetry that would comment on political conflicts and anxieties while remaining separate from them (as in *Black Torch*). Instead, *Jury Vet* assaults the reader with a delirious mix of political anger, sexual fantasies and alienation techniques. The autobiographical sources for the conflicted, punk persona of *Jury Vet* are clear: in 1979, MacSweeney and Elaine Randell divorced. MacSweeney moved to Darlington in 1980 to work on the *Evening Despatch*, and became involved in an on/off relationship with another journalist called Sue, who shared his love of the newly emergent punk rock. MacSweeney was 31 years old, feeling bitter about his recent divorce, but also excited about his new freedom and young enough to catch the excitement of punk. I will now consider the dominant discourses in *Jury Vet*: fashion, punk music, politics and pornography.
MacSweeney first discovered the hyper-associative linguistic surface that characterises *Jury Vet* in *Odes*. He would subsequently develop his interest in collage and self-referential intertextuality in *Memos*, and perfect it in *Demons*. Throughout *Odes* we find a similar use of phonetic echoes and a fetish-like harping on words. Consider the way 'Make your naked phone call moan'\textsuperscript{36} echoes 'Make your naked pencil mine';\textsuperscript{37} or 'O pulchritudinous orb de la dish scourer,/ bring suds!'\textsuperscript{38} echoes 'O pusillanimous orb de la Brillo/ fetch pseuds!'\textsuperscript{39} However, while *Jury Vet* and *Odes* both match fetishised language with explicit subject matter, they do so to very different effect. The hedonism of *Odes* has been both intensified and strangely depersonalised in *Jury Vet*.

Many of the 'explicit' references in *Odes* are reminiscent of Fanny Hill's bawdy euphemisms: 'lavender torpedo',\textsuperscript{40} 'naked pencil',\textsuperscript{41} 'Gristle piston',\textsuperscript{42} 'moons/ of fat',\textsuperscript{43} and 'the vulva/ clam'.\textsuperscript{44} The reader is invited to 'Sample the hardness'.\textsuperscript{45} But some of *Odes*'s more gothic images ('Menstrual poke/ of blood'\textsuperscript{46}) and some of its compounds of obscenity and fashion-industry language ('frig tits when they/ lubricate/ the starlet's feathered// twat'\textsuperscript{47}) look forward to the Sadean assault of *Jury Vet*:

\begin{quote}
Moths flame inside her

\begin{center}
\begin{romanlist}
\item crimson yoni,
\item as if she were a Zodiac
\item in pink July\textsuperscript{48}
\end{romanlist}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

These lines are reworked in *Jury Vet*:

\begin{quote}
yoni triggered like a frigidaire

\begin{center}
\begin{romanlist}
\item in a
\item Zodiac
\item of
\end{romanlist}
\end{center}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{36} 'Flame Ode', p.57
\textsuperscript{37} 'Torpedo', p.58
\textsuperscript{38} 'Panther Freckles', p.49
\textsuperscript{39} 'Dunce Ode', p.47
\textsuperscript{40} 'Torpedo', p.58
\textsuperscript{41} 'Torpedo', p.58
\textsuperscript{42} 'Panther Freckles', p.49
\textsuperscript{43} 'Ode Peace Frog', p.50
\textsuperscript{44} 'Snake Paint Sky', p.45
\textsuperscript{45} 'Disease Ode Carrot Hair', p.51
\textsuperscript{46} 'Fox Brain Apple Ode', p.52
\textsuperscript{47} 'Ode Stem Hair', p.48
\textsuperscript{48} 'Fox Brain Apple Ode', p.52
\end{footnotes}
magenta Aprils.49

The content of the lines has barely changed: what have been revised are the tone and the syntax; grammatical connectives such as ‘as if she were a’ have been abolished to create a speedier, jagged movement and greater immediacy. In *Odes*, sexual and linguistic excesses were leavened with more plainspoken lines.

Both *Odes* and *Jury Vet* adapt Michael McClure’s centre-justified lines and use of capitalisation, but again they do so to different ends. McClure’s formal devices are immediately identifiable, but arbitrary. McClure eschewed traditional form in order to communicate more immediately with the reader: rhyme and metre were felt to be a barrier. *Jury Vet* would likewise see formal demands (including syntax and punctuation) as intolerable mediations, but MacSweeney does not wish to communicate with his readers so much as attack them, and his use of capital letters, exclamation marks and lines bisecting the page suggest his impatience with the need for a text at all. Nothing is permitted to interrupt *Jury Vet*’s sustained assault, and McClure is invoked in order to mockingly deconstruct the free love, hippy assumptions behind his rhetoric. McClure says:

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WE ARE THE BLOSSOM, THE PISTIL,
THE THORN AND THE NERVE.
WE ARE THE SURGE THAT FLOATS IN SPACE
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MacSweeney replies:

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OKAY CRIMSON VARNISHED REDHEAD YOU’RE
THE BIG ATTRACTION NOW
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By exchanging McClure’s inclusive first person plural for an equally insistent second person, MacSweeney reveals its latent coercion, dramatically changing the tone of McClure’s new-age ethic. MacSweeney had believed in this ethic, but by 1979, after a divorce and two rejections from the poetry establishment, he was disillusioned. MacSweeney has kept up with youth culture, and the alternative lifestyles advocated in the 60s have given way to the oppositional lifestyle favoured in the late 70s: the age of punk has arrived.

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49 ‘LOVE IS THE DRUG AND YOU NEED TO SCORE’, p.101
51 ‘LOVE IS THE DRUG AND YOU NEED TO SCORE’, p.101
The influence of punk is immediately identifiable in Jury Vet: the speaker is overwhelmed by consumerism and self-destructive desires, but seems to revel in this abject, defeated state. The poet’s triumph has been mysteriously redefined as his ability to offend the reader: a quintessentially punk position. Punk’s paradoxes (it is anti-social, anti-capitalist, anti-system; and yet also forms a community, a fashion and an ethos) made perfect sense to MacSweeney, since punk’s requirement was ‘not exactly that it should oppose what it loathed, but that it should become something equally loathsome as a mode of opposition’; and the term ‘punk’ was originally an insult, traditionally used by authority figures and directed at the lowest orders of society. Jury Vet references many more female punk bands than male, and the poem has obviously learned from female punk identity. In attitude and appearance, The Clash are not all that far from The Rolling Stones, but punk’s biggest advance was in how female rock stars could present themselves. Female punk groups appropriated traditional masculine forms of behaviour, dress, music and attitude; and deconstructed traditional concepts of femininity. This self-destruction and self-invention, specifically as a form of protest and social commentary, is what MacSweeney captures in Jury Vet.

Jury Vet’s references to music and fashion lead Clive Bush to see the poem as an attack on consumer culture: ‘the young vainly attempt to turn the fact that they have been targeted by a cynical mass production machine, known curiously by the name of “popular” culture, into some kind of self-authored gesture.’ Certainly, the consumerist stress on choice and indulgence is shown to be delusive: what differentiates the characters is simply what they wear: ‘Brown heels on JOSE. / Blue heels on JANE’, and a virulent misogyny has been internalised alongside the other prefabricated desires consumer society serves up. However, while Jury Vet takes seriously the threat to subjectivity posed by consumerism, finding it guilty of promulgating conditions that encourage (or demand) compulsive over-indulgence, to call the poem a straightforward attack leaves us with the paradox of MacSweeney’s enthusiastic acceptance of the star myth and his fetishistic love of the objects he lists:

Thrill box arias in the lust of tampon grandeur.

52 Morris, pages unnumbered.
54 ‘JURY VET IN VOGUE’, p.107
Frill tease stockingtop flames.
Sue cancels each Deneuving rivulet of horn.
Swelling lapus cuffchunks,
yoni triggered like a frigidaire
in a
Zodiac
of
magenta Aprils. 55

Here, sartorial details dazzle and cascade in every conceivable shape and colour, giving the poem a lush, thick texture like an expensive fabric. MacSweeney’s enjoyment in neologism is clear, and he uses it to transform the most banal items of clothing into something that sounds more exotic, for example sandals become ‘sandalettes’. MacSweeney clearly finds the temptations of consumer culture appealing, even if self-indulgence is shown to be concomitant with self-loathing. While Jury Vet’s assaults on commodities can be read as an attack on consumerism, the assaults on female celebrities such as Catherine Deneuve are more complicated. Celebrities may be felt to stand as the embodiment of consumerist desires; but the speaker’s assaults also express self-disgust. Violence is a means by which the damaged self projects itself onto the object of its desire/disgust, and the misogyny of Jury Vet may simply be symptomatic of internalised societal problems.

If the advent of Thatcherism makes MacSweeney’s instinctual refusal of camaraderie appear politically prescient, he may also be guilty of using it to sanction his misogyny. This, and the puritan/pervert binary that fuels the poem, is reminiscent of John Knox’s pamphlet The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, which attacked Mary Tudor and Mary Queen of Scots. Here is a representative excerpt:

For who can deny but it is repugnant to nature, that the blind shall be appointed to lead and conduct such as do see? That the weak, the sick, and impotent persons shall nourish and keep the whole and strong [sic]? And finally, that the foolish, mad and frenetic shall govern the discreet, and give counsel to such as be sober of mind? And such be all women, compared unto man in bearing of authority. For their sight in civil regiment is but blindness; their strength, weakness; their counsel, foolishness; and judgment, frenzy, if it be rightly considered. 56

55 ‘LOVE IS THE DRUG AND YOU NEXT TO SCORE’, p.101
56 John Knox, The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558) p.6
http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=AYPIDxsMnxC&dq=jonh+knox+forst+blast+trumpet&pg=PP1&ots=AG9Sda6xk0&sig=6Zhfo10VZCHvBDQ0FmMjvkHeDTw&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result#PP A6.M1 [accessed 4.9.08]
John Knox (1510-72) was the founder of Presbyterianism, and one of the architects of the Scottish Reformation. In exile from Scotland in 1550, Knox was appointed preacher in St Nicholas' Cathedral Church in Newcastle, where he worked for five years; and Newcastle remained an important centre for Presbyterianism throughout the Reformation. In the early 1990s, MacSweeney would regularly attend a John Knox Presbyterian church in West Denton with his mother. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, the reactionary, Presbyterian aspect of MacSweeney's personality always contended with its radical, dissenting aspect, and the speaker of Jury Vet frequently asks to be punished for his transgressions:

Love you tempted Tudor rose.
[...]
Now you have punished me
I will eat red stones.  

The volatile ambiguity over whether Jury Vet passes or requires judgement — whether the speaker is an arbitrator or an aberration — is introduced by the poem's title, which must be read in one of two ways: as the job title of the person who vets the jury and ensures that they are fit to judge; and as an imprecation for the jury to do their job ('jury: vet!'). Like 'Colonel B', Jury Vet takes its title from the ABC trial, which was repeatedly delayed by accusation of jury vetting by the police. The subject of journalists who stand accused by the corrupt state was clearly attractive to MacSweeney, but again he could not or would not depict it directly. The poem draws its strength from such inconsistencies. Throughout, we have the sensation of information streaming at us too quickly to be processed. While the nature of the subliminal imagery is clearly sexual and violent, it is left to the reader to draw the boundary lines. Jury Vet can be seen as an attempt to delay the moment in which sexually charged language enters into a discourse or frame of reference, making the reader uncomfortably aware of the political decision s/he must make regarding the import of the lines.

The languages of fashion and popular music as a means of self-definition have also been explored by MacSweeney's contemporary Denise Riley. Consider the closing lines from 'Lure 1963':

57 'PINK MILITANT JAYNE', pp.123-24
58 MacSweeney added the title to the poem at a late stage and the trial is never mentioned in the poem; bizarrely, he also attributes the title to a fabricated quote by Catherine Deneuve: 'even my earrings failed the jury vet.' By now we expect a gap between title and poem, between impulse and execution.
Oh yes I'm the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much. I'm wearing. And you're not listening to a word I say.⁵⁹

'Lure 1963' takes its title from a painting by Gillian Ayres, and the poem plays self-consciously on various associations with that word and that date. The ending of the poem turns on the two meanings of 'wearing:' to dress (in borrowed clothes) and to be emotionally draining. Commenting on these lines, Robert Sheppard has said

The weaving of song lyrics into the text (so that what is quotation and what is not, what is expressive and what is ironic, is unclear) enacts the ambivalent remembering and misremembering of a nostalgic and narcissistic content that the poems themselves appear to offer...⁶⁰

Many of Riley's poems find the poet enthusiastically interrogating her attempts at linguistic self-presentation for signs of authenticity and truth, though the tone is typically brisk and even cheerful. In 'Lure, 1963', Riley registers her envy of a painter's ability to create an art unmediated by language and unburdened by the need to represent. By contrast, a poet seems compelled to present herself, even if only by implication: since 'Lure 1963' is a collage of musical and colour references, there is nothing of Riley herself in the poem. The last line, 'you're not listening to a word I say', is liable to give the reader a flush of guilt: did our attention wander? Was something asked of us without our noticing? And yet we were listening so attentively! While Harriet Tarlo is right to say the closing lines '[draw] attention to the passivity of the girl who is her clothes' in order to highlight 'the fakeness of sixties femininity',⁶¹ the reader is more likely to respond to the poem's relish in itself: it clearly enjoys its references to pop songs and paintings. 'Lure 1963' is a consummate performance, and as here in the essay 'Bad Words' (an exploration of injurious speech's afterlife in the psyche of its victim), the effortless grace of Riley's writing adds a further layer of irony to her argument on the impossibility of mastering language:

Some graceless prose of the world has got me in its grip, and my word-susceptible faculty is seized and filled up by it. It's a neurolinguistic circus, this wild leaping to

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my tongue of banally correct responses, bad puns, retold jokes to bore my children, and citation without discernment. To this list could be added many other kinds of stock formulae, in the shape of racist utterance, idle sexism, and other prefabrications. Inner language is not composed of graceful musing, but of disgracefully indiscriminate quotation, running on automatic pilot.  

At first, Riley's diagnosis of linguistic suggestibility might sound more applicable to the speaker of *Jury Vet* than the speaker of 'Lure 1963':

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YOU WANT HER BROKEN WITH HER MOUTH WIDE OPEN
BECAUSE SHE'S THIS YEAR'S GIRL.
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Frail apache, rue de la disco waif, let me part the Dralon curtains down across the vinyl cushions of yr birth. Shattered rouge tete, drenched natural beauty bounties & Bunty annuals combined. JET leather strapettes skim her milkshake skin, blue lights jive. 

However, rather than showing 'disgracefully indiscriminate quotation', MacSweeney's quotation from punk song lyrics in *Jury Vet* is more akin to a cover version, recorded for inclusion on a tribute album. This is a difficult trick to pull off, requiring respect, but also an individual 'take'. Slavish imitation would be considered bad form, as would a radical deconstruction *a la* the Ramones' version of 'Do You Wanna Dance'. For all its punk credentials (its citation of the Raincoats and the Slits, etc), *Jury Vet*'s references to music are respectful, and contain as little irony as any homage: rather than incorporate quotations into surprising contexts that would enable new perspectives, MacSweeney sets quotations apart by printing them in capital letters, or using them as the titles of sections of the poem, as in 'LOVE IS THE DRUG AND YOU NEED TO SCORE' or 'BE A NICE GIRL KISS THE WARDERS'.

MacSweeney's appropriation of punk lyrics is in keeping with the Modernist 'Ezuversity' tradition: a poet must define his/her own canon in order to define how s/he wishes to be read. MacSweeney does not subvert the authority of the pop lyrics he quotes,

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63 'PINK ENAMELLED TOSSPOT', p.118
64 Roxy Music, 'Love is the Drug', *Siren* (Virgin, 1975)
65 Elvis Costello, 'Pump It Up', *This Year's Model* (Riviera Global Record Productions, 1978)
unlike his treatment of Classical music references in 'Liz Hard II', in which Liz informs us 'Beethoven's a bang, but Schubert/ is a thigh-suck'⁶⁶ and more importantly 'I haven't got TCHAIKOVSKY TITS OR A DELIUS DANGLING TWAT'⁶⁷ In other words, MacSweeney believed in a canon: punk was in, Classical was out. Although we may be tempted to call the juxtaposition of Elvis Costello and Thomas Wyatt 'post modern', MacSweeney cites these antecedents for their authority: he still believes – without irony – in the individual artist and that it is possible to construct meaning and value from the choices we make in our creation and appreciation of artworks. This belief in the endurance of the individual, despite the assaults of Thatcherism and consumerism, leads to a dramatic change of tone in the final section of the poem, in which fetishism and brutality suddenly give way to rhapsodic tenderness. It also distinguishes Jury Vet from 'Wild Knitting', which is characterised by an almost Prynnian cynicism towards the stability of identity.

The title of the final section 'ALL THE MIDNIGHT CHOSEN: JURY VET ON FIRE: GUY FAWKES, 1981' re-affirms the context of political dissidence that we have glimpsed in the references to punk, Margaret Thatcher and John Knox. The overheated poem has been threatening to explode for some time but, like the Guy Fawkes plot, this is adverted at the final hour, when the punk quotations are augmented by references to Thomas Wyatt's poetry (also capitalised, in order to keep them distinct from the voice of Jury Vet itself: 'THEE WASP WITH NAKED FOTE STALKING IN MY CHAMBRE'⁶⁸), and the female addressee is suddenly accorded more agency than in previous sections:

Thee bodysnatcher.
Thee raincoat.
Thee pink military.
Thee go-go.
Thee selector.
Thee fast-speaking woman.
Thee apricot bridesmaid.
Thee Laura Ashley wonderful.⁶⁹

The use of punk band names as epithets means the invocation of the female is not wholly positive – calling your loved one the 'pink military' would almost certainly raise an eyebrow

⁶⁶ 'Liz Hard II', p.100
⁶⁷ Ibid., p.99
⁶⁹ Ibid., p.129
- but at least she is no longer on the receiving end of the transgressions. Instead, she is cast as
the jury vet ('Thee selector') and a social worker (I suspect 'bodysnatcher' is a reference to
MacSweeney's ex-wife Elaine Randell having been a social worker; in an interview
MacSweeney refers to social workers as 'childsnatchers' and 'the Stasi'). The shifting
linguistic surface has calmed; the sentences are longer, and the switches between images less
frequent.

Such a miraculous leap out of the linguistic mire is not without precedent in
MacSweeney's work: many of the poems in Cabaret and Boulevard concluded with a stanza
that appeared 'grafted on', the heavy closure signifying his anxiety over whether the reader
was getting the message. In Jury Vet, the change of tone is less intrusive because, so
hysterical is the poem up to this point, a dramatic reversal is paradoxically to be expected,
and the references to the medieval Perle poem have already hinted that an idealised vision of
femininity will be the predictable flipside to the delirious misogyny, after the virgin/whore
dichotomy of Mary and Mary Magdalene. Mary was impregnated by the Word: thus her body
remained a 'pure' vessel; this is the antithesis of Jury Vet's treatment of the female body,
which is endlessly described, inscribed, distorted and exposed through pornographic
language. (In Pearl, MacSweeney will idealise a female entirely untouched by language due
to her muteness and illiteracy.) The final section's change of tone does not represent a
resolution as much as a switch to the opposite pole of the puritan/pervert dialectic in which
the speaker remains trapped.

Finally, like a confession after the jury has returned its verdict, a footnote tells us that
the poem was abandoned in October 1981, much as the poet would shortly abandon Sue, the
woman who inspired the poem. The footnote presents us with a final ambiguity. Is
MacSweeney telling us this is a botched job? Is he claiming the poem is incomplete, and
refusing to accept artistic responsibility? To abandon something is to assert authority over it,
and I interpret this as a heroic, Late Modernist gesture: a means of insisting on closure and
authorship, and one that reminds us of Pound presenting poems as fragments salvaged from
prolonged study.

The abandonment, like the tone-change in the final section, indicates the quest
structure that Jury Vet shares with all of MacSweeney's key poems. Prior to this, Jury Vet
evokes a pathological condition from which escape appears impossible, and until the abrupt
U-turn in the final section, there is a little development in *Jury Vet*. Despite, or because of, the all-consuming need to keep up with changes in the fashion world, everything takes place in an arrested present moment. No orgasm is powerful enough, no transgression extreme enough, to break the cycle of anger, violence, satisfaction and shame. The quest goes on until the poem is abandoned (from exhaustion perhaps) rather than completed. Neologism and an eclectic vocabulary cover up the fact that very little actually happens, just as pornography promises new girls, more elaborate scenarios and more revealing images, while endlessly offering more of the same.

Although MacSweeney's poems may look very different on the page, and employ a variety of tones and personae, they consistently display an insatiable appetite for detail and a desire to immerse the reader in the created world, whether that world is one of glamorous violence (as in *Jury Vet*), obsessive lament (as in *Ranter*) or self-abasement and degradation (as in *Demons*). After the hedonistic *Odes*, which often found MacSweeney engaged in leisure pursuits, *Jury Vet* is MacSweeney's first concerted attempt to replicate his inner turmoil as the keynote of the reading experience, an impulse that will be fully explored in *Demons*.

*All the Broken Dollpeople: 'Wild Knitting' (1983)*

MacSweeney met Lesley Bourne on an Arvon course in the autumn of 1982 and they married in March 1983. A week later, MacSweeney became news editor for the *Telegraph and Argus*, an evening paper based in Bradford and one of the best local papers in the country. MacSweeney could have used this as a stepping stone to a national newspaper, but this was not to be. The marriage lasted less than three months. Afterwards, in a determined attempt to appear reasonable, MacSweeney gave Jackie Litherland the following précis:

I got married, after a whirlwind romance last autumn. We were married in London in March, two weeks before I was due to move to Bradford. We moved, into a furnished, rented house, and I set to work at 12/14 hours a day. You can imagine the kind of start that gave us in our life together. One thing led to another: Lesley away from London and her close-knit network of family and friends for the first time in her life (she is 36), not seeing me from dawn till dusk, no job, no friends in Yorkshire. Result? Misery. I got home one night in early June, to find a note and an empty house: Gone
back to mum. The time after that, has been fraught with the most expensive feelings imaginable, and I am only now climbing out of that particular hellhole. We are probably getting divorced... ...that kind of pressure after a 12-hour slog on the blitzkrieg newsdesk surely made life an expensive thing to live earlier on this year. 70

In a pattern set during his marriage to Randell, MacSweeney avoided his emotionally needy wife by devoting all of his time to his journalism, ensuring the marriage would not last. The phrase 'blitzkrieg newsdesk' might have been taken from the poem he wrote at this time, 'Wild Knitting', in which the speaker finds his wife has 'gone/ right back/ to/ Mum'. 71

MacSweeney's quotation of Bourne's farewell note in 'Wild Knitting' affronted Prynne, and signals the first occasion when MacSweeney surpasses his mentor. Ironically, 'Wild Knitting' is MacSweeney's most Prynnian poem, attacking the grand narratives, poetic tropes and linguistic sleights of hand that a poet might deploy to reassure the reader of a stable selfhood and the continuity of identity over time. With the exception of the equally masterful 'The Last Bud', much of MacSweeney's work depends on precisely these frameworks for its effect. 'Wild Knitting' is a genuinely risky poem: one that rejects its author's earlier work, and demands a huge shift in style. Unsparing of personal and social sensitivities, the poem throws down a gauntlet that MacSweeney did not pick up until Demons twelve years later.

'Wild Knitting' is one of MacSweeney's most bizarre titles, more so if the reader knows that Wild Knitting is the name of a tiny hamlet in Allendale, for the poem is concerned with urban corruption and sink-hole housing estates. However, from another point of view, the title is apt, because the poem's vision of contemporary urban England is informed by MacSweeney's childhood memory of rural communities. Like its predecessor Jury Vet, 'Wild Knitting', concerns individuals entirely determined by a society in terminal decline. Dimly aware that something somewhere has gone badly wrong, these 'broken dollpeople' 72 are helpless to make amends and must continue to define themselves through degraded social signifiers. While Jury Vet often seemed to delight in its own debasement, 'Wild Knitting' is aggressively judgmental, and MacSweeney frequently comes close to suggesting his subjects deserve their limited, frustrated lives; as if their ignorance and self-defeating behaviour were innate characteristics, rather than a product of a sick society. John Wilkinson has commented:

70 Letter from Barry MacSweeney to Jackie Litherland, dated 25.10.83, in Litherland's possession.
71 'Wild Knitting', p.136
72 Ibid., p.132
MacSweeney confounds the nostalgia of left-liberalism; the desolate Albion on which the poem opens fails to usher in the conventional lament for broken communities and hand-wringing over the fate of the unemployed – MacSweeney, after all, is one of few poets who has always worked outside the public sector, and his libertarianism is calculated to offend social workers grossly.  

MacSweeney’s refusal of solidarity is connected to his switch from presenting himself as a spokesman for a community in Black Torch to the ‘lone wolf’ persona he would soon adopt in Ranter and later work. The sense of alienation rather than identification with the victims is surely part of what makes ‘Wild Knitting’ such an unusually successful political poem for MacSweeney. The poem is enabled by hyperbole, by the masks the poet wears, by the masks he doesn’t wear, and by the interplay of various conflicting voices. Without the licence conferred by the wearing of masks, MacSweeney would be dependent on the subtlety of his political analysis which, as we have seen, is not his strongest suit.

Popular culture receives an even more negative handling than it did in Jury Vet and, despite an epigraph from Elvis Costello (‘Everyday, everyday, everyday, I write the book’74) the speaker is highly critical of those who listen to ‘Rockstar posies, rubbishers/ of text’.75 So much for MacSweeney the wannabe rock-star. Similarly, movie references are always negative, beginning with the Swiftian suggestion of home-made snuff movies as a means of escape from unemployment:

...porn
videos & snuff movies on the rental
get you in the out
tray
from bondage underwear
& the bluebeat skanking jobcentre... 76

When specific films are referred to, they are used to provide further examples of a murderous division between men and women:

[...] Macbeth quotes,
Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf,

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73 John Wilkinson, p.93
74 ‘Every Day I Write the Book’, Elvis Costello, Punch the Clock (Riviera Global Record Productions, 1983)
75 ‘Wild Knitting’, p.132
76 Ibid., p.132

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psyched fury, never papering
the nursery, none of it.

I wreck the cot & cuddle corner in my head, burn the children,
AGAIN\(^77\)

Also typical of MacSweeney's strong poems is the attack on journalism. He criticises the journalistic habit of caricaturing people and events, and wishes to escape from reliance on such prefabrications:

\[\ldots\text{Not living off choirboy}\]
\[\text{sex probe vicar/ disturbing revelations}\]
\[\text{that/ workshy teenager who/ stage struck sex}\]
\[\text{queen vowed today/ all the page three rumour}\]
\[\text{gang!}^78\]

The language of journalism is equated to inarticulacy, insanity, advertising and corruption:

Madness in speech, fuming cloudpuffs, all these moody
Italian perfume ads, ponce clusters, tongueclamps,
rant money, bent fivers\(^79\)

Nevertheless, a residual scepticism that there is anything beyond these caricatures remains; and the poet, despite the caveats, is firmly characterised as a journalist-commentator. That is, a producer, rather than a suggestible consumer of societal phenomenon, as he had been in \textit{Jury Vet}. While the imagery is similar to that of \textit{Jury Vet}, there is new focus and concision to the writing, and the sociological context guides us towards understanding rampant consumerism as both a symptom and a cause of a diseased society, even if the poet withholds his pity.

As in \textit{Jury Vet}, there is a tone-change in the final section. The following moving image of the absent loved one is rescued from the flames:

\[\text{So close to death}\]
\[\&\text{ the cover of September Vogue.}\]
\[\text{Always a September girl.}^80\]

\(^77\) Ibid., p.134
\(^78\) Ibid., p.138
\(^79\) Ibid., p.133
\(^80\) Ibid., p.138
From this point, the poem forms a high elegiac lament that is more compelling than the equivalent movement in *Jury Vet* because here, significantly, there is no change in subject matter. MacSweeney does not rely on a sentimental vision of another, better world to come, nor does the poem overstate love’s ameliorative qualities. The poem ends with the image of a couple still threatened by the pernicious prefabrications of the cosmetics industry, journalism, alcohol and popular culture. Nevertheless they go on, wearing the war paint of the enemy, ‘fantastically/ liprouged’, and willing to risk ‘the penalties/ of speech/ & blood’. Although ‘Wild Knitting’ relocates the area where hope may be fostered from the public to the private sphere, its conclusions are qualified and provisional.

Although he almost always denigrated its importance to his poetry, journalism enabled MacSweeney to keep up to date with national life and even play a modest role in it throughout the 1970s and early 80s. As such it can be seen as one of his more productive responses to his traumatic marginalisation as a poet. Drawing on his experience of being a journalist, *Jury Vet* and ‘Wild Knitting’ are among his most prophetic poems. *Jury Vet* brilliantly anticipates the libertinism and callous decadence of Thatcher’s 80s; and its delineation of the affectless, heartless nature of consumer capitalism precedes Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* by ten years. Furthermore, in its foregrounding of fragmented language; its increased sense of indeterminacy and discontinuity (giving rise to a sense of urgent anxiety); and its oppositional stance towards the reader (and, by extension, official literary and political culture), *Jury Vet* can now be seen as a key text in bridging the British Poetry Revival of the 70s and the Linguistically Innovative Poetry of the 80s. The immediacy and authority of MacSweeney’s response to changing societal conditions places him at the forefront of his literary generation: like a good journalist, he was first on the scene.

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81 Ibid., p.138
In this chapter, I will consider *Ranter* and 'Finnbar's Lament': poems in which MacSweeney's anger gives way to bargaining, the third stage in his adjustment to his traumatic reception. By the early 80s, the small but loyal audience that appreciated *Odes* had disbanded, having lost the focal point provided by the Poetry Society. Seeing that he would have to renegotiate terms with his audience, MacSweeney created a poetic persona designed to reach a wider readership in *Ranter*. MacSweeney sent the manuscript of *Ranter* to Bloodaxe, Faber and even his old enemy Hutchinson. His failure to secure one of these established publishers and find a bigger audience precipitated a breakdown and a six year period of depression, showing MacSweeney's huge emotional investment in the project. What I am calling 'bargaining' was not simply a marketing ploy: by 1984, after his second disastrous marriage, MacSweeney wanted to become another kind of poet; and beyond that, he wanted to become another kind of man.

Focusing on the influence of Ken Smith's *Fox Running* and Basil Bunting's *Briggflatts*, I examine the way MacSweeney constructs a Northumbrian literary kingdom in *Ranter*. I also ask whether *Ranter* can be considered a political poem, and consider its attitude to the turbulent society it describes.

*Ranter's Bargain (1984)*

(The book, *The Tempers of Hazard*, was launched with a reading at Compendium. And then rapidly pulped. Rupert Murdoch's accountants saw no reason to tolerate low-turnover cultural loss-leaders. Barry took it hard. More than any other British poet MacSweeney was possessed by the knowledge that, being one of those gifted with language, he was also cursed. His was a true "sickness vocation" – a questing for the heats and silks of fame, firework effects, the dazzle of a Mike McClure shriek cut with French decadence. He fixated on spoiled heroes, stopped in their youth: Rimbaud in 'The Boy from the Green Cabaret Tells of his Mother', Jim Morrison in 'Just Twenty-Two – and I Don't Mind Dying', and Chatterton. He didn't sit out the dead years in comfort. And then, when it seemed that work such as his was being allowed back into the debate, the plug was pulled. Trundling around the small-press circuit, with its comfortable outcasts, its triumphally defeatist politics, had lost its appeal.)
Barry perfected the profession of being difficult, the gift of rage. Took it to the point of collapse, his life in hazard.\(^1\)

It is fitting that Iain Sinclair's account of MacSweeney's almost invisible history appears in parenthesis. Sinclair is looking back from the vantage point of 1993, when MacSweeney's selected poems were published by Paladin and then almost immediately pulped after the press was bought out by Rupert Murdoch. According to Sinclair, in the 80s MacSweeney tired of the underground scene as surely as he had embraced it in the 70s. The poetry wars were over and in 1982 *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* air-brushed the entire period out of the picture. In their infamous introduction, the anthology's editors (Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion) refer to: 'a stretch, occupying much of the 1960s and 70s, when very little – in England at any rate – seemed to be happening. [...] Now, after a spell of lethargy, British poetry is once again undergoing a transition...'.\(^2\) This is not so much a case of history being written by the victors, but by those with no interest in the war. The editors claim that the poets represented in the anthology 'show greater imaginative freedom and linguistic daring than the previous poetic generation';\(^3\) but they define 'previous poetic generation' as 'the empirical mode which was conspicuous, largely because of Philip Larkin's example, in British poetry of the 1950s and 60s'.\(^4\) The British Poetry Revival had already been forgotten.

In avant-garde circles, the Revival was also being left behind. As I noted in Chapter Two, many commentators distinguish between the Revival of the 60s and 70s and the Linguistically Innovative Poetry (hereafter LIP) written from 1977 onwards. The unwieldy term LIP was coined by Gilbert Adair in the magazine *Pages* in which Adair described the 'public invisibility of the poetry' and of 'decreasing publishing opportunities; wide gaps in continuations of public... discussions... [and] a one-way “dialogue” with oppositions that largely expunge us from more public discussion'.\(^5\) This 'less visible, less real'\(^6\) scene was characterised by fragmentation and a greater readiness to embrace exclusion and invisibility. Cris cheek describes the conditions:

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\(^1\) Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory* (London: Granta, 1997) p.156


\(^3\) Ibid., p.12

\(^4\) Ibid., p.12

\(^5\) Gilbert Adair, 'Dear Robert, "Linguistically innovative poetry" for which we haven’t yet a satisfactory name', *Pages*, ed., Robert Sheppard (March 1988) p. 68

\(^6\) Ibid., p.68
Rapid deterioration began. For the best part of a decade from 1980 there was only really occasional Kings' readings (put on by Eric Mottram), the Sub Voicive readings series curated by Gilbert Adair, and Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum workshops. ...But really the scene, which had been a steaming scene, went flat.\footnote{cris cheek quoted in Keith Tuma *Fishing by Obstinate Isles* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.212.}

In his introduction to *The New British Poetry*, Ken Edwards agrees:

Where once, in the 1960s and 1970s, British poets creating the new... forced the literary establishment to sit up and take notice, now silence is eerie and almost total. No longer does the establishment revile modernism in poetry; it simply ignores it.\footnote{*The New British Poetry* (London: Paladin, 1988) Ken Edwards's introduction to the section 'Some Younger Poets' p.265}

In the 70s, the Poetry Society had given Revival poetry a forum, and to a certain extent had acted as a focal point for different kinds of innovative poetry. The variety of the poetry had been fostered by exposure to different work, as is demonstrated by *A Various Art*, the most representative anthology of the 70s generation, which presents everyone together and stresses the absence of common terms. The editors make a virtue of this:

We have not attempted to provide a polemic apology or manifesto because no claim is advanced here for the existence of anything amounting to a school. Many of the poets represented have read and responded to one another's writing, but what impressed us most, while we made our selections, was the degree of difference that existed between individual poets, and the extent to which each poet had accomplished a characteristic and integral body of work, with its own field of interest and attention.\footnote{*A Various Art*, ed., Andrew Crozier and Tim Longville (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987) p.13}

It would be disingenuous to overlook the divisions among the avant-garde: there had always been friction between the Cambridge and London scenes: *A Various Art* can be seen as a riposte to Mottram, who had published very few Cambridge-based poets in *Poetry Review*. Nevertheless, after the Poetry Society walk-out in 1977, the splits widened and the avant-garde scene divided into cliques according to geography and age (by the mid 80s there was an emergent generation of innovative poets who had not been part of the Revival and who did not wish to define themselves according to its terms). The atomised 80s scene is reflected by the way the editors of *The New British Poetry* felt it necessary to give Revival poetry and LIP separate sections.
In many ways, MacSweeney falls between the groups: he is not included in *A Various Art*; and although included as a Revival poet in *The New British Poetry*, he is the youngest member of that group. While he had been in close contact with both Prynne and Mottram, he had not allied himself exclusively with either; and he had not been geographically tied to London or Cambridge since the early 70s. Finally, his adoption of avant-garde techniques having less to do with academic/political theorising than with personal motives relating to theatrical self-promotion and even more theatrical disguise, MacSweeney had always been intermittently attracted to popular culture and to poetry that would have been considered unacceptably ‘official’ or ‘mainstream’ by many on the underground scene.

*Ranter* was written in Bradford between February and September 1984; most of the poem was completed by July. It is a sequence of four poems, each containing several sections. The first poem, ‘Ranter’, is the longest, and introduces the two principle characters: Ranter and his Bride. The location is Northumberland (some shooting has been done in Kent and Ireland) and the poem has extraordinary historical sweep, from Cl*Ⅰ* to the present day. The second poem, ‘Snipe Drumming’, is much shorter, and has greater clarity and focus as most of it is spoken by the Bride. The third poem is the angriest: ‘Ranter’s Reel’ is the closest *Ranter* comes to actual rant; although the target is ambiguous, as I will show. The final part, ‘Flamebearer’, is a tender duet between Ranter and Bride and one of the finest pieces of writing in MacSweeney’s oeuvre. *Ranter* was quickly followed by the long poem ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, which MacSweeney described as Ranter’s ‘comet’s tail’.10 Although the speaker’s name has changed and the action relocated to Ireland, ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ completes the emotional arc of Ranter’s story: it is spoken by a fallen Celtic warlord who addresses his captors and considers his life.

*Ranter* is, like all of MacSweeney’s major poems, a quest. The speaker is searching for his lost love, the Bride; but the poem itself is a quest for a readership. In one of the few reviews *Ranter* received, Maggie O’Sullivan wrote:

*Ranter* comes to us resounding with monstrous soul, terrible unease, rhythmic intensity, great political strength; it is a moving, sensitive work of poetic maturity; it absolutely confirms MacSweeney’s previous poetic procedure and places him right in

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10 Barry MacSweeney reading his poems
the dynamic of English poetry, right in there up to his head, in the real and vital bloodstream of Blake, Shelley, Clare and Bunting.\textsuperscript{11}

The important phrases here are ‘comes to us’ and ‘moving’. Instead of swerving away, \textit{Ranter} ‘comes to us’ in a more direct, accessible manner than any poem MacSweeney had written since ‘The Last Bud’. For this reason, it is surprising that O’Sullivan says the poem ‘absolutely confirms MacSweeney’s previous poetic procedure’: to most readers, MacSweeney’s previous procedures would appear antithetical to his project in \textit{Ranter}; and O’Sullivan distinguishes herself as one of the first readers who venture to understand MacSweeney’s work as an organic whole. \textit{Ranter} is a pivotal poem: while there is still evidence of swerving, there is also a new emotional directness. Reflecting this duality, \textit{Ranter} moves in an unbalanced fashion: from the first line, he is ‘loping’: unbalanced, off-kilter, perhaps wounded and only moving because he must. The poem is ambiguous over whether Ranter is hunter or hunted:

\begin{verbatim}
Ranter loping
running retrieving
motoring chasing
her with a cloakclasp
sniffing her trail
loving wanting
eyes on any horizon
but this blind spot
leaping the fence of his enclosure
nose down in open fields
stunned with blood
trailing her scent
greyhound quick from the trap\textsuperscript{12}
\end{verbatim}

Here, in one of the first of \textit{Ranter}’s many reversals, ‘sniffing her trail’ becomes ‘trailing her scent’. Is the speaker following a trail or setting one? If he is setting a trail, is he doing so in order to work his hounds, or is he the quarry? The poem maintains this sense of provisional definitions and stays alert, always correcting itself, throughout.

MacSweeney’s preference for light punctuation and lexical rather than grammatical words means that syntax is suspended, creating the effect of speedy movement. The absence of syntax precludes grammatical resolution and suggests the speaker’s inability or

\textsuperscript{12} ‘Ranter’, p.140
unwillingness to order his thoughts into logical units. Concrete details and place-names arrive at too fast a rate for the speaker to frame them grammatically:

- snipe drumming
- stealing into empty nests
- shimmering in hillhaze
- Cheviot to Killhope Law

The restlessness of speaker and poem suggest an unstable society in which it is impossible to stand still or wait for meanings to settle. The poem follows a 'loping' rhythm, as short, verbless stanzas ('Thrift like a haze') alternate with stanzas that begin with the key verb in the present participle ('Aching... learning... forsaking... returning... hoping' etc). The effect suggests an animal moving rapidly through a landscape, pausing to sniff the air for a few seconds, and then resuming the hunt. Having internalised his oppressors, Ranter is both self-directing and self-hunted: 'driving himself/ out of the wild.' MacSweeney no longer swerves away from the reader, but dramatises conflicted, self-defeating characters who swerve away from their own best interests; this motif will be fully explored in *Demons*.

*Ranter* seems to be another of MacSweeney's wayward titles: the poem is one of MacSweeney's most self-conscious constructions and it rants rather less than the poems that precede it. The speaker admits: 'I'm a growler not growling/ not doing my job.' Nevertheless, although *Ranter* bargains, laments, reasons and repents more than it assaults, the rant is an expression of a desire for power, and the poem should be read as just such a declaration of intent. Andrew Duncan praises MacSweeney's ability to inhabit the mind set of his historical character: 'The narcissism, delight in adornment, heroism, and pride of Celtic warriors, the features we find hardest to assimilate, are carefully integrated by MacSweeney.' I understand 'carefully' to mean 'partially and with caution' rather than 'faithfully': MacSweeney is just as careful to leave out certain details: the Ranters were a revolutionary sect of the Cromwellian period, related to the Brethren of the Free Spirit and sometimes known as Spiritual Libertines. MacSweeney uses the term loosely to signify resistance to the established order. He does not refer to the radical atheist/pantheist element.

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13 Ibid., p.140
14 Ibid., p.142
15 'Ranter', p.143
16 'Ranter's Reel', p.166
17 Andrew Duncan, 'The mythical history of Northumbria; or, feathered slave to unreasonable demands: Barry MacSweeney (1948-200)', *Poetry Salzburg* No.1, p.140
because that would contradict the speaker's Protestant sense of impending retribution. He does not refer to the levelling social aims of the Ranters, such as the abolition of property, because these would contradict the proud Celtic warlord element. MacSweeney has seamlessly replaced the stream of contemporary pop culture prestige-objects with cloakclasps and psalters.

*Ranter* has been carefully edited: its range is broad, but controlled. Contemporary diction and imagery such as 'motoring' help keep the poem usefully off-balance, but MacSweeney uses such moments sparingly so that they always surprise: 'Shot from a Range Rover/ I will rise.' There are no references to popular culture. An earlier draft included the lines

Stuck with
headful
ideas
driving him
insane

This is a reference to Bob Dylan's lines in 'Maggie's Farm':

I wake up in the morning; hold my head and pray for rain.
I gotta head full of ideas that are driving me insane.
They say 'Sing while you slave!' but I just get bored...

Dylan's mock slave-song is an apt reference point, but its comic bathos would jar with *Ranter*. MacSweeney has imposed strict limits on what this voice can do, in contrast with the excesses embraced in *Jury Vet*, or the wild, unstable mask of 'Wild Knitting'.

The clearest sign of MacSweeney's bargaining tactics is the way he becomes more open to influence from mainstream traditions during what Sinclair calls 'the dead years'. Consider these lines from 'Ranter':

loper, glider,
dashing for game,
loading his gun,

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18 'Ranter's Reel', p.167
19 Archive: BM: 1/13/4
20 'Maggies Farm', *Bringin' It All Back Home* (Columbia, 1965)
In this list of epithets, the most unusual is 'reader'; the others suggest an animal, a hunter, or at least a predatory man. We would not usually consider reading to be a characteristic of the hunter-gatherer, but MacSweeney clearly did. 'Reader' is followed by the equally surprising 'desperate for attention'. While it might be considered self-aggrandising to call yourself a 'trap setter, marriage breaker', to say that you are 'desperate for attention' sounds like a candid admission of a smaller failing. MacSweeney is searching for a new audience, and Ranter is strewn with broken lines of communication: diary, radio, reel and telephone all prove unreliable. A repeated motif is attempted communication with Bede, Cuthbert, Aidan and Suibne on a ham radio:

Picking up Bede and Cuthbert
on the ham radio
in his birdbrain wolfskull
wondering why they don’t answer back
wondering why Sweeney hasn’t called from Killiney Hill

Aidan was an Irish monk who became first Bishop of Lindisfarne in 635. Cuthbert became Bishop of Lindisfarne in 685 and is buried at Durham, as is Bede (b. 673 in Jarrow) who wrote hagiographies of Aidan and Cuthbert, as well as early histories of Northumberland. What connects Suibne to the three Northumbrian clerics is that they were all instrumental in the establishment of a Christian ethos among heathen people. Suibne was an Irish king who was deposed and punished as a heretic by the cleric Ronan Finn, who exiled Suibne in the form of a bird. However, these lines are significant not so much because of their advertised Northumbrian antecedents, but for the fact that we see in them the influence of Seamus Heaney (Sweeney Astray), Basil Bunting (MacSweeney's mythologising of Northumberland begins in earnest with Ranter), Ken Smith (who refers to the broken radio in Fox Running) and Ted Hughes (Ranter appears to be a Wodwo, or Crow-like character, who is waiting for

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21 'Ranter', p.150
22 Ibid., p.141
the Saints to return his call because he does not understand the fact that they are dead). I understand ‘strangler of cries, particularly his own’ to refer both to MacSweeney silencing his own inner voice of protest at the influence of what had long been prohibited mainstream poetries as he tries to read himself into the canon, and also perhaps his attempt to stifle or contain that influence.

In ‘Snipe Drumming’, Ranter distinguishes between the time for fighting and the time for reading:

*Time for books after the scourge*

Sit in my cell with a quiver of pens, gold-leaf for the page.

Drawing maps, borders wanting more than I had.

For wisdom return to myself wearing pelt because I am wolf. Wolfric my brother a hearty man.

Killed with my axe and now he is in me.

This is a coded reference to MacSweeney’s position after the poetry wars (‘the scourge’), when he withdrew and tried once more to redraw the map of British poetry and establish his place on it. The line ‘For wisdom return to myself’ suggests a period of self-revision. The motif of killing someone and absorbing their identity as a metaphor for reading returns in ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ (‘I dragged him from a monastery/ and made his spirit mine’), a poem that is also spoken by a warlord who has belatedly discovered the joys of reading:

Preferred my blade to the slow business of books.
You can’t kill a man with a word.

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23 The influence of Hughes’s poem ‘Wodwo’ is clear from MacSweeney’s introduction of Ranter at a reading he gave at King’s College: ‘Part man, part bird, part wolf, in any combination at any time and has, he has, it has, no control over what form this may be when the sun comes up’.

24 ‘Snipe Drumming’, p.162

25 ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, p.182
For these admissions
of course I do
expect an extra
stroke or two.

What does the speaker mean by 'admissions'? His own boastful/shameful confessions, or the latest admissions into his Hall of Fame? If the cryptic reference to 'Wolfric my brother' recalls *Brother Wolf*, we should also remember that MacSweeney's alternative title for 'Finnbar's Lament' was 'Glad Wolf Battle Gosling', a bizarre title that connects the poem to earlier work such as *Brother Wolf* and 'Wolf Tongue'. What unites all of these seemingly disparate wolf poems is their concern with appropriated identity. I will now consider how MacSweeney invites and manages comparisons between *Ranter* and the poetry of Ken Smith (whose obvious influence MacSweeney denied) and Basil Bunting (whose influence, signposted by MacSweeney, turns out to be more indirect).

**Alias Smith: Fox Running and Ranter**

It is not surprising that the poetry MacSweeney wrote in the early 80s should bear the influence of Ken Smith. MacSweeney wanted what Smith had achieved: soon after the Poetry Society walk-out in 1977, Smith was picked up by Bloodaxe Books. 'Tristan Crazy' was Bloodaxe's first publication and in 1983, Bloodaxe published Smith's selected poems, *The Poet Reclining*. Having slugged out invisibility through the 60s and 70s, Smith emerged in the mid-80s as 'Godfather to the New Poetry', his stature growing in tandem with that of his publisher. Unfortunately, MacSweeney's attempt to assimilate Smith's style proved a little too successful.

MacSweeney sent the manuscript of *Ranter* to Neil Astley at Bloodaxe Books on 11.9.84 with a courteous, typed covering letter. On 18.10.84 he sent a second typed letter, with two £1 stamps for the return of the manuscript. On 31.10.84 he sent a third, handwritten letter, asking whether Astley had come to a decision and enclosing Maggie O'Sullivan's preview of *Ranter* from the new issue of *Slow Dancer*, which was billed as a 'MacSweeney

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26 *Tristan Crazy* (Newcastel upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1977)
Special’. The large claims O’Sullivan makes for Ranter (she calls it ‘a major poetic work’ that is ‘due out soon, I hope, in its fullness, from any publisher with a smidgen of sense’) did MacSweeney few favours. Indeed, Astley appears to take issue with O’Sullivan’s hyperbole in his reply on 19.11.84:

The Ranter section is certainly a powerful piece of writing, and its use of historical reference, its relation to ranting, seems to me very well done indeed. But it is so influenced by Ken Smith’s Fox Running that I can’t see how anyone who knows both poems can think of it as ‘major’ or even original. While your ranter is deeply personal to you, it is a direct copy of Ken Smith’s Fox. Not only are the identities identical — or rather your way of exploiting the identity in the poem — but there are numerous similarities in phrasing, rhythm and even in your use of the same words. [...] Anyone who doesn’t know Fox Running would have to be excited by the whole of Ranter: its pace, its skilful variations, its fusion of modern, historical and natural imagery. [...] But the whole poem, however powerful it may be, collapses completely for me every time I recognise that Smith has been there before.

MacSweeney took Bloodaxe’s rejection badly, and told Jackie Litherland that Astley had accused him of plagiarism: something Astley denies. Bloodaxe eventually published the poem in Wolf Tongue in 2002. I will now consider whether MacSweeney has a case to answer.

There are clear similarities between Ranter and Fox Running. Both poems detail a man’s failings and offer a critique of antisocial, pent-up masculinity: they are both spoken by men who are on the run from their obligations or the consequences of their actions. Both poems attempt to capture a figure on the move by continually shifting the frame of reference: images, points of view, situations and settings are taken up and discarded rapidly, reflecting the speakers’ restlessness and mistrust of larger organising structures, whether linguistic, social or political. Both poems withhold details of their wider context: in an interview, Smith claimed Fox Running was spoken by someone deciding whether to rob a bank, but this is not made clear to the reader. Likewise, we are not told who or what Ranter is, or what he is running from. Despite this, Fox Running and Ranter are not cryptic poems. The withholding of key information enables wider significance: the characters’ rootless anxiety appears to be a condition of wider society. Both Fox and Ranter are self-consciously displaced from language: Ranter says

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28, Maggie O’Sullivan, ‘Some from the Heart’ in Slow Dancer No.14, pages unnumbered.
29 Letter from Neil Astley to MacSweeney, dated 19.11.84. A photocopy was sent to the author by Neil Astley.
Fox makes a similar demand:

I want a word
a beginning word forming in its water bead

I want a word forming fingers of itself
in the belly of all language

I want a word fusing in the first 4 seconds of the bang

MacSweeney has highlighted several poems in his copy of *The Poet Reclining*, including key works such as ‘Family Group’ and ‘Eli’s Poem’. MacSweeney highlights the line ‘to the world’s rim’ in ‘Six: the wife’s complaint’ and uses a variation of it as the last line of ‘Finnbar’s Lament’. The tone of ‘Six: the wife’s complaint’ has also clearly influenced ‘Flamebearer’. Although MacSweeney has not annotated *Fox Running*, the repetition of ‘word’ in the lines quoted above show that MacSweeney is clearly familiar with Smith’s poem. Other key words that MacSweeney appears to have taken from *Fox Running* include ‘running’, ‘loping’, ‘small’, ‘broken’, ‘enclosure’ and ‘brother’. The motif of the faulty radio is common to both, as is the hunted/hunter paradox. MacSweeney’s choice of the Dartford Loop line is equally telling, because it is one of the few train lines that does not appear in *Fox Running*: MacSweeney is respectfully keeping off Smith’s turf.

There are significant differences between the two poems. Consider the different ways the characters are lost: Fox is lost because he has moved to London and ranged into new and unfamiliar territory; whereas Ranter’s range is temporal rather than spatial. This distinction manifests itself in many ways. For example, while both speakers chant lists of place-names,

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30 ‘Ranter’, p.145
32 Ken Smith, p.102
they do so to different effect. Fox seems bewildered by London place-names\textsuperscript{33} such as Riverdale and Gypsy Hill, and they seem to carry exotic resonances that would not be apparent to native Londoners. By contrast, Ranter's place-names are known, and have a proven significance to the speaker: he reassures himself by chanting them like a litany. While both speakers are products of contemporary alienation, only Ranter is aware of the historical precedents for his condition. As Sean O'Brien has observed of Smith's work 'large social events are experienced as rumour and hearsay',\textsuperscript{34} and from Fox's point of view, history has likewise been relegated to a provisional status: in Thatcherland it is up for grabs along with everything else. \textit{Fox Running} contains a single, fleeting reference to an English political context ('Unlikely as the middle ages, // villages before enclosure...')\textsuperscript{35} and a single quotation from the Old English poem 'The Wanderer' at the end of the poem: 'a wise man holds out'.\textsuperscript{36} The absence of a more detailed historical context may seem surprising, but these are the only reference points Smith requires: we understand Fox to be a scion of a long line of disinherited English radicals. We are aware of his lineage even if he is not. Dramatic irony and restraint of this kind were beyond MacSweeney: instead of a single, finely judged quotation, Ranter invokes his precursors on every page, and the deluge of historical citations is related to the disproportionate allusions to Smith: \textit{Ranter} represented a break with his previous methods and readership. MacSweeney was flying blind and, eager to be accepted by his new target audience, reverted to the clumsy, too-obvious allusions that marred his earliest work.

There is a further difference in the distance MacSweeney and Smith keep from their speakers. Sean O'Brien has observed: '[Smith's] work, though very observant, is always more likely to be that of a participant in the traffic of anonymity than an observer privileged by position or linguistic distance.'\textsuperscript{37} This is surely true; however, Smith does maintain some distance from Fox, using technical terms like 'idetic images'\textsuperscript{38} that seem to come from outside of Fox's vocabulary, and an irony that implies a distance between author and character:

\begin{quote}
Winter and summer all he loved
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} See \textit{Fox Running}, pp. 162-63
\textsuperscript{34} Sean O'Brien, \textit{The Deregulated Muse} (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998) p.82
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Fox Running}, p.150
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 169. See also Michael Alexander, 'The Wanderer' in \textit{The Earliest English Poems}, pp.70-73
\textsuperscript{37} O'Brien, p.84
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Fox Running}, p.168
lied to him when he'd not
hurt anyone would he. Such
were the gaps in his schedule. 39

This distance allows Smith more scope for humour. Much of pages 152-55 consist of apparently overheard lines such as:

if I'd been a woman
I'd have lost my temper

if I'd been a man
I'd have lost my erection 40

The humour depends on Smith’s unfailing ear for everyday surreal witticisms. By contrast, the speaker of Ranter is more fundamentally isolated: either he doesn’t notice other people or he is the only one moving through this landscape. MacSweeney is too self-obsessed and he never gets around to fixing that ham radio: Smith is an eavesdropper, MacSweeney a raconteur. Early drafts of Ranter included supposedly comic stereotypes of people from Wales and Yorkshire: ‘Ranter writing: Thank God I’m not a Yorkshireman / always on the cadge’. 41 Thankfully these were cut.

While there is little humour in Ranter, there is some wit: MacSweeney has managed to get his wordplay working, and his quibbles now turn words into hinges connecting the past and the present, for example: ‘Pelted with feathers/ in his other life’. Here, pelted means both attacked (perhaps recalling the conscientious objectors of WWI who were given white feathers) and also the pelt of feathers worn by Suibne: a form of protection. The lexical ambiguity is pointed: Ranter cannot distinguish friend from foe.

The poems also differ structurally: Ranter is structured like a troubadour quest for a lost loved one: the speaker’s goal is to find his Bride, and her speech at the end of the poem stands as a kind of consummation, or resolution. By contrast, Fox Running has a circular narrative, like the underground map Fox reads. The reader can’t imagine how Fox will ever break out of this cycle, and this connects to the self-perpetuating problems in his society. The

39 Ibid., p.135
40 Ibid., p.155
41 Archive: BM: 1/4/14

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role played by women is a further difference: Fox mentions his lost love in passing, but *Ranter* allows her to speak and even gives her the final word.

*Fox Running* and *Ranter* are in some ways parallel poems in terms of tone and theme. Now that Smith’s influence is more widespread and more widely acknowledged, his influence on *Ranter* seems less remarkable. Smith has clearly influenced MacSweeney, but the poems show significant differences in their construction of character and their structure. We can now see Fox and Ranter as early examples of the rootless-outsider-autodidact personae that would come to define some of the best poetry of the Thatcher period; we think of the poetry of Peter Reading42 and Douglas Oliver,43 Douglas Dunn’s ‘Green Breeks’, ‘Tannahill’ and ‘Moorlander’,44 Sean O’Brien’s Ryan poems45 and David Constantine’s *Caspar Hauser*.46 A rapid increase in homelessness, the destruction of industrial communities, the creation of no-go areas in all major cities, and funding cuts to social services and education meant that any poet in tune with the climate of the 80s would have to write about vagrants and wanderers drawn to the city through loss of habitat.

The Greater Northumbrian Kingdom of Linguistic Excellence: *Briggflatts* and *Ranter*

MacSweeney’s relationship with Basil Bunting remained deeply ambivalent, ever since 1968’s ‘The Last Bud’, in which MacSweeney rejected Bunting as a possible mentor, in favour of Jeremy Prynne. Towards the end of his life, in April 1995, MacSweeney agreed to write a biography of Bunting. Although MacSweeney was not able to undertake such a work at this time (by June he was in a detox clinic), it is surely significant that he does not appear to have begun work on the project at any point. In this section, I want to look at the brief period (1983-84) when MacSweeney actively promoted himself as a follower of Basil Bunting.

43 Douglas Oliver, *Penniless Politics* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994)
46 David Constantine, *Caspar Hauser* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994)
When MacSweeney describes Bunting's importance in 1979, he gives the standard line:

Basil's lesson is: condense. Don't waste words. Keep the poem tight, sinuous. [...] The second crucial lesson is: "Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sound—long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relation of vowels, the relations of consonants to one another which are like instrumental colour in music. Poetry lies dead on the page, until some voice brings it to life". 47

MacSweeney appears content to take Bunting at his word, which suggests he has not read Bunting's poetry particularly closely: if he had, he would surely have been struck by the many incongruities between Bunting's theory and practice. MacSweeney does not comment further on Bunting's lessons, possibly because he had never applied them to his own work: MacSweeney rarely condenses (consider the phrase 'condense. Don't waste words. Keep the poem tight, sinuous'), and by 1979 had distanced himself from poetry that could communicate in performance. Bunting's influence does not extend to compositional practice: but as we have seen, MacSweeney often responds by instinct to a poet's aura, rather than by close attention to their work: by aura, I mean a network of indefinable associations and assumptions, some cultural and some private. Bunting was integral to the Newcastle poetry scene in the 60s, so MacSweeney would not have had to read his work particularly closely to understand what Bunting stood for.

Bunting provided many pointers as to what he stood for, and how he wished to be read, through various media extraneous to the poems. While the poems never hector or propagandise, their author was not above doing so in interviews, lectures and in footnotes to the poems. Here he is engaging in some distinctly Modernist oppositional mapping:

There are perhaps half-a-dozen books in the world comparable to the Codex Lindisfarensis. They were all produced by Northumbrians, or by people under the immediate influence of Northumbrians. The Book of Durrow, which is in Ireland, is believed to have been made in Northumberland. The Echternach Book, which is, I forget whether it's [in] Germany or Luxembourg, was made there by Northumbrian missionaries. The Book of Kells, which is about a century younger than these, was

47 Poetry South East, p.40
made in Ireland, at a time when Ireland was chock full of Northumbrian scholars and monks.  

The image of history is that of continually changing racial identity but continually recurring and lasting cultural identities, and the flowering of art and literature and history in ancient Northumbria has been a lasting thing. You can see quite clearly the same kind of considerations occurring to Swinburne as those that you will find in the pages of the *Codex Lindisfarniensis* [sic], or in *Beowulf*.  

Bunting is using the Lindisfarne illuminations to establish the terms of a native Northumbrian art, one that reflects his own practice of combining of complex patterning with a clear overall structure. Bunting made many statements of this kind. It is difficult to engage with them closely because the terms have been left deliberately vague: assent or dissent is called for; and if it seems sketchy, a disciple will surely help colour it in. We can match them with similar quotes from Hugh MacDiarmid: 'the Gaelic genius, from its origin in Georgia to its modern expression in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, Galicia and the Pays Basque...'

Or this from David Jones:

...The Engl. Bible, Milton, the Puritan Revolution, the Jacobeans, Pope – anything you like – ‘Ann’ civilization, the whole 18th Cent business, God knows are English enough – but a great foreign influence seems to have all but strangled the particular quality we seem to all recognize electric from the remote past – Celtic-Anglo-Saxon – to make you weep in the early middle age...

These are recognisably the views of autodidacts, who found self-reliance and bloody-mindedness difficult qualities to relinquish. Those who grow accustomed to being against the grain are often impatient with opposing points of view, and suspect people who bolster the consensus as having had less fraught educations. All of these poets argue for a mythic, ahistoric Britain that draws on an unquantifiable Celtic heritage. All value oral culture above canonical tradition; ephemeral pre-linguistic art forms such as song and dance above the stable text; and myth above history. All define themselves in opposition to a parochial English literary culture that, from the Georgians to the Movement, denigrated Modernism in favour of a ‘native’ literary tradition. The anti-Modernists’ image of independent, self-

50 Hugh MacDiarmid, quoted in Donald Davie, 'The Letters of MacDiarmid and Graves', With the Grain (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998) p.221
51 David Jones, quoted in Donald Davie, p.234
sustaining England was just as contrived – the claim to native purity just as spurious – as anything the Modernists dreamt up, though the resulting work was much less interesting.

Oppositional mapping was not a Modernist preserve: in the 70s, Bunting’s Northumbria would be joined by Geoffrey Hill’s Mercia and Ted Hughes’s Elmet. In ‘Englands of the Mind’, Seamus Heaney describes how Hughes, Hill and Larkin establish mutually exclusive kingdoms: ‘All three treat England as a region – or rather treat their region as England – in different and complimentary ways. I believe they are afflicted with a sense of history that was once the peculiar affliction of the poets of other nations who were not themselves natives of England but who spoke the English language.’ If ‘different and complimentary’ sounds benign, we should remember that there is no point in setting up a kingdom unless you’re going to be king in it. In practice, the rulers of these kingdoms fastidiously ignored one another: so although Hughes and Bunting both saw official English culture as an occupying army, they did not unite against it. Heaney does not pursue his postcolonial reading of English poetry. But any poet defining themselves in opposition to what they perceive to be official literary culture must answer the familiar postcolonial question of whether to adopt the oppressor’s cultural traditions with an aim of subverting them, or to return to (or recreate) a native tradition. I will now consider some of the ways Basil Bunting and Barry MacSweeney construct a kingdom of Northumbria, in an attempt to sweep Southern England, in particular London, out of the picture.

The first step was to identify some specifically Northumbrian literary antecedents, but this proved difficult. William the Conqueror’s savage response to the Northern uprising against Norman rule in 1069 became known as the ‘harrowing of the North’. Within a few months, 150,000 people were slaughtered and a huge amount of the land from the Humber to the Tweed was laid to waste. Food stores and livestock were destroyed, and much farmland was salted, leaving it sterile for decades, and the Domesday Book refers to much of Northumbria as wasta est: waste land. The cultural damage lasted much longer: Anglo-Danish lords were replaced by Normans, and the native culture was forced underground: it survived, but went largely unrecorded. Northumberland lagged behind the rest of England in terms of education and industrial development for centuries; and continual territorial disputes

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53 In 1069, a group of lords and earls, assisted by Denmark and Scotland, formed an army of Viking, Gaels and Angles, and attempted to reclaim the North from the Normans.
with Scotland meant that the region was synonymous with lawlessness (the border reivers). These conditions nurtured a thriving oral culture (the border ballads) but precluded a continuous literary culture. Northumberland was sometimes called 'debatable land' on maps, and not considered civilised until after the Reformation. This is the foundation of the Northern view of Southern England as another country.

Bunting utilised these extensible borders and unwritten histories in order to find Northumbrian roots for poets he admired: Spencer, Wordsworth, the author of Beowulf, and Thomas Wyatt. The fact that Wyatt's father came from Yorkshire allowed Bunting to place Wyatt at the head of the English Renaissance and find a northern influence over all that followed. Bunting even felt that Yeats improved greatly after reading Wyatt under Olivia Shakespear's instruction; thus Yeats was brought into the Northumbrian fold. This regionalist propaganda is matched by MacSweeney's annotations to his 1984 copy of John Clare's The Midsummer Cushion. Of the lines 'In this chimneys sooty nook/ I with pleasure can abide', MacSweeney has noted 'northern English - Saxon rather than Chaucerian/Gallic. Clear edges, nouns + adjectives'. MacSweeney was still in pursuit of that honest northern tongue when reading 'Farewell to Love'. Of the lines

Tempt me no more with rosey cheeks  
Nor daze my reason with bright eyes  
Im wearied with thy painted freaks  
& sicken at such vanities

MacSweeney remarks 'modern tongue of Chatterton - northern voices, w/out Gallic influence. Good on yer, John!' Again, he is paraphrasing Keats's words on Chatterton; and again, we sense his isolation in the way his terms of reference have not changed.

Northumbrian identity has always been synthetic. The Lindisfarne illuminations, the cornerstone of any Northumbrian Kingdom, were the product of Celtic, Germanic and Mediterranean cultures. Irish antecedents were particularly important, since Northumbrian Christianity was Celtic, having been introduced by Aidan in the C7th at the request of King Oswald. This is why Bunting referred to 'continually changing racial identity but continually

54 John Clare, 'Our Own Fireside', The Midsummer Cushion (Manchester/ Ashington: Carcanet/ MidNAG, 1979) p.73
55 John Clare, 'Farewell to Love', The Midsummer Cushion, p.141
56 See Chapter Two, 'On Not Being Thomas Chatterton'.
recurring and lasting cultural identities.' *Briggflatts* sets up a Northumbrian kingdom that extends to Orkney, York and Dublin. MacSweeney’s equally dubious concept of northernness takes its bearings from Chatterton (Bristol), John Clare (Nottinghamshire) and the Perle poet (Midlands). Both poets are engaged in a species of confabulation: constructing a cultural memory to fill the gap left by historical repression.

Just as they cite dubious Northumbrian antecedents, Bunting and MacSweeney claim a Northumbrian heritage for their language. Bunting argued that ‘southrons’ could not understand Wordsworth because they couldn’t pronounce his northern sounds,57 and his introduction to the notes to *Briggflatts* leads the reader to expect a glossary of Northumbrian dialect words:

The Northumbrian tongue travel has not taken from me sometimes sounds strange to men used to the koine or to Americans who may not know how much Northumberland differs from the Saxon south of England. Southrons would maul the music of many lines in *Briggflatts*.58

In fact, there are relatively few dialect words in the notes (‘oxter’ and ‘hoy’ are the exceptions). Tony Lopez observes:

One note tells us that Bloodaxe should be known but is not known by ‘Northumbrians’ — but I suppose that they may not, except for this poem, know themselves as Northumbrians. It seems to me that the notes themselves reconstruct an ancient Northumbria by harnessing old north-south divisions and prejudices, mixing up some northern words with others not so restricted, and presenting a quick checklist of names and texts to establish the basis for a cultural identity for anyone willing to take up the bait.59

MacSweeney took up the bait in 1985’s *Ranter*, in which Bunting’s presence is frequently signposted. One recurrent Bunting signifier is the word ‘fipple’. In his notes, Bunting defines this grand Old Norse word as ‘the soft wood stop forming with part of the hard wood tube the wind passage of a recorder’.60 MacSweeney appears to think a fipple is itself a musical instrument. Even if you know what it means, ‘fipple’ is not a word you have recourse to use often, but it appears in *Ranter* several times because it is forever associated with *Briggflatts*,

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60 Basil Bunting, *Collected Poems*, p.226
where it appears in a key passage. By a strange process, it is reclaimed as a signifier of northern-ness.

Briggflatts's greatest confabulation is its revisionist history of Northumberland, structured around the contrasting figures of Eric Bloodaxe and St Cuthbert. Bunting connects these figures to his themes of identity, vocation, restlessness, isolation and belonging. According to Peter Makin, Bunting intuited that Bloodaxe had left Norway to his brothers in order to avoid bloodshed. Bloodaxe then played the Viking on these islands, declaring himself king of Dublin, Orkney and York until the locals or another king chased him off. Northumberland was the main stage upon which he enacted this performance. Cuthbert signifies the opposite pole: he was an Irish monk who was persuaded to be Bishop of Lindisfarne, but who stepped down after two years to live in solitude on Farne. Cuthbert makes an equally doubtful founding father, since almost everything we know about him has been filtered by Bede, who was opposed to Cuthbert's Celtic form of Christianity. For example, Bede's emphasis on hierarchy and the chain of being led him to interfere with the one historical fact with which Cuthbert is known: his concern and respect for animals. But Bede's unforgivable crime in Bunting's eyes was his siding with Wilfrid and the Synod of Whitby in 664 against the Celtic strand of Christianity that Aidan had imported from Ireland. Christianity had been established in Ireland peacefully, without a martyr, by incorporating many more 'heathen' elements than the Roman forms of Christianity could tolerate. Bede, part of the Roman tradition, obsesses over these concessions, such as the Celtic church's incorrect computation of the Easter festivals. Out of respect for Hiberno-Northumbrian culture, Bunting refuses to acknowledge Bede in Briggflatts, projecting the poem's themes of solitude and pantheism onto Cuthbert instead. Bunting once claimed that Part 5 of Briggflatts was spoken by Cuthbert in love with all creation. The reader is not told this, perhaps because it would not help us: the historical figure of Cuthbert left no monument. We can connect Bunting's choice of founding fathers about whom nothing certain is known, to MacSweeney's earlier choice of Chatterton as his literary antecedent: these figures do not 'mean', rather they are a mechanism by which others have construed meaning.

61 I am persuaded by Makin's interpretation of Bloodaxe's significance. Although Makin has been criticised for reading too much into the bare hints offered by Briggflatts, I believe that this sort of detective work was precisely what Bunting (like Pound or MacDiarmid) wished to encourage in his followers. See Peter Makin, 'Appendix 3, St Cuthbert in the Hands of Bede', Bunting: The Shaping of his Verse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) pp. 331-33
The Bede-versus-Cuthbert debate was alive for Bunting, and it comes as something of a relief that MacSweeney had no such compunction, referring to Bede alongside Cuthbert, Aidan and Eric Bloodaxe as equally-weighted signifiers of northern-ness. Bunting insisted that a writer should know 'bloody well' what he was writing about (we recognise the northern emphasis on graft), but MacSweeney was always in thrall to the contradictory northern emphasis on stylish adornment. MacSweeney's opportunistic allusions to Celtic Christianity are an attempt to usurp Bunting's crown, and are part of his bargaining tactics, designed to attract a new publisher and a new readership. Nevertheless, the influence of Bunting's oppositional mapping can be felt in the way Ranter (which deals with issues of governance, control and boundary making over twenty centuries) avoids mention of London and always stresses the Northumbrian angle. For example, MacSweeney's depiction of the Industrial Revolution protests focuses on Thomas Spence, the Tyneside schoolmaster and printer, whose followers instigated riots in 1800-01.

MacSweeney was stung when Bloodaxe rejected Ranter because he had laced Ranter with references to Smith and Bunting precisely to appeal to Bloodaxe's editor. If we hear an echo of T.S. Eliot, as Faber editor, rejecting Bunting's early work for sounding too much like Pound, well, we should. Bunting and MacSweeney found it necessary to exclude themselves from official English literary culture, to attack it, to find suitable antecedents and mentors, to develop their own idiosyncratic canon and assemble a cultural kingdom - before finally writing their best work late in their careers. Ranter failed, but it was at least an important failure. MacSweeney was forced to publish Ranter in the small press world he had been trying to escape. He expresses his despair in his next poem, 'Finnbar's Lament', in which MacSweeney retreats to the mythical Ireland that he, like Bunting, had annexed as part of Northumbria.

62 'Unless a man knows bloody well what he's doing he's not going to do it very well, so a man whose thought is floppy is not likely to produce anything but a floppy poem... ' Basil Bunting, quoted in Donald Davie, Under Briggflatts (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989) pp.144-45
63 I link MacSweeney's literary acquisitiveness, and his real-life dandyism, to the 'new money' mentality that remains prevalent in Newcastle. There is a grain of truth in the cliché that nobody in Newcastle wears a coat when they go out; this is because they want you to see their designer clothes.
Linden Peach describes the tendency many Northern writers share to write in a harsh, abrasive style as "part of the attempt to resist larger hegemonic forces... part of the attempt to find a language that will enable them to express their own, resistant sense of identity". We find plenty of this tough-talk in *Ranter*, but it fades out as the poem progresses and the calmer, steadier voice of the Bride takes over. 'Finnbar's Lament' completes *Ranter*’s emotional and stylistic arc with a longer poetic line and a smoother movement: there are no sudden jump cuts, and a stable historical setting is maintained. Finnbar is defeated, and after him, all of MacSweeney’s creations will speak to us from defeat:

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God forgive me
least of souls

forgive my face
its crookedness
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Finnbar has lost his wife, his home, his title, his land, his enthusiasm for battle and his pride. He invites the inevitable punishment. Although Finnbar enjoys reminiscing about his days as a warlord, we never get to see him in action. When he tells us that he was once "an animal/unleashed on souls/ more used to prayer and prattle", we understand this to have been a long time ago. The irony is that in being disinherited, Finnbar/MacSweeney comes into his own: as Nicholas Johnson has observed, the lament is "[MacSweeney's] natural mode". I will now consider the ways in which these changes are facilitated by the relocation to Ireland; and how the poem's concern with the appropriation of identity extends and revises *Ranter*’s exploration of the same theme.

*Ranter*’s signposts of kinship with Ken Smith and Basil Bunting have been removed, and 'Finnbar's Lament' emerges as a version of the fall from grace and power endured by King Suibne in *Suibne Geilt*. Ireland is presented as a kind of unfallen Albion: rural, structured, stable; a land whose poetic traditions are intact, whose men are war chiefs and

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65 'Finnbar's Lament', pp.179-80
66 Nicholas Johnson, 'Barry MacSweeney: an Appreciation', *Independent*, 13.5.00
whose women are grateful. I have discussed MacSweeney's decision to alter his birth name of 'McSweeney': one reason he didn’t want to change his name altogether is the link it provided to the Irish King Suibne: an early model for the poet forced into exile and solitude because of his uncompromising speech and conduct, and one that powerfully influenced MacSweeney's understanding of the role and function of a poet. Ireland held conflicting associations for MacSweeney, standing for his poetic vocation, but also for negative masculinity, violence and retribution – largely because his abusive father was Irish.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, MacSweeney is frequently guilty of indulging the Protestant English stereotypes of passionate, violent Ireland and effeminate, affected France. As we saw in his remarks on Chatterton, MacSweeney follows Keats in associating Chaucer with the invasion of effete French idioms into English. MacSweeney complains that 'pink fleur de lys/ invaded the psalter', and claims to hate 'the French words/ invading my books'. By contrast, MacSweeney finds 'blood on the words/ which are Northern'. It appears that the more northern you are, the more authentically English you are, due to your increased distance from France. The fact that Chaucer is bedtime reading for Ranter's southern Bride is evidence of her unsuitability as a mate: 'singing for the sleepless// Chaucer in her lap.' This sexist/racist stereotyping will disappear in MacSweeney's next major collection, Pearl. Here, it is symptomatic of MacSweeney's psychodrama: women are desired, but also feared and rejected because they are potential mothers: they have the ability to turn a man into a father, something MacSweeney dreads because his identity depends on his being a rejected/abused son.

Bunting also took up Keats's complaint about the Frenchified Chaucer. Bunting claims that Chaucer's verse forms and 'conventions of thought' are French; as are the line, texture, architecture and shape of his poems. French characteristics, as defined by Bunting, include 'the form is a very loose fit for the matter', the poetry is 'slower and much wordier' with many 'elaborations and interruptions and moralisings' that deprive the poem of 'tension'. Instead there is a 'rather misty, garrulous prettiness'. It is not a coincidence that these characteristics are the antithesis of the presumably northern qualities Bunting prized in

67 'Ranter', p.156
68 Ibid., p.156
69 Ibid., p.156
70 Ibid., p.157
71 Bunting's list of French characteristics can be found in Basil Bunting on Poetry, p.37-8
his own writing: concision, shape, and an exact fit between form and content. This prejudice against France, and the perception of southern English culture as an occupying army, is shared by many northern writers, and can be traced back to the earliest radical dissenters. For example, In An Appeal to the House of Commons... Gerrard Winstanley traces the corrupt social hierarchy of the day to the Norman conquest; he rails against English law being written and expounded in French; and he attacks the practice of paying tithes to the church ‘in thankfulness to the pope’.72

Relocating the action to Ireland means that ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ stands as a return to the father; but since MacSweeney's bargain has failed, this will be a return in shame and defeat, like that of the Prodigal Son. There is a queasily paternal aspect to Finnbar's unnamed captor; an intimate, humiliating dimension to the punishment (enhanced by Finnbar’s inviting it) that brings to mind an abusive father:

Hammer home my rudeness
strike my head
confirming my badness

making most
of my humiliation. [...] 

Break my blade. I will dance on its fragments

in any public place
you care to name. [...] 

Take this small but neatly-written
list of friends.73

This self-abasement is MacSweeney's response to the way Ranter was disastrously overpowered by its poetic father figures Ken Smith74 and Basil Bunting.

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72 See Gerrard Winstanley, 'An Appeal to the House of Commons, Desiring their Answer: Whether the Common-people shall have the quiet enjoyment of the Commons and Waste Land; Or whether they shall be under the will of Lords of Manors still' in The Law of Freedom and Other Writings, ed., Christopher Hill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) p.123
73 ‘Finnbar’s Lament’, pp.179-180
74 Although Ken Smith was only ten years older than MacSweeney, he was something of a father figure: Smith was deputy editor of Stand when MacSweeney received his first publication there, and Smith’s selected poems had appeared in 1983.
The relocation to Ireland also suggests Seamus Heaney’s influence, for Heaney had translated *Suibne Geilt* as *Sweeney Astray*. *Sweeney Astray* appeared in May 1984, at the same time as Heaney’s collection *Station Island*, which includes a series of poems collectively called ‘Sweeney Redivivus’: poems written in Suibne’s voice, sometimes in contemporary contexts. *Station Island* is the only poetry book by Heaney in the Barry MacSweeney Room, and the copy falls open on the ‘Sweeney Redivivus’ section, of which MacSweeney has highlighted several poems and marked particular lines with asterisks. As usual, MacSweeney tunes-in to lines that resemble his own poetry: “The royal roads were cow paths” would not sound out of place in *Pearl*. Although *Sweeney Astray* is not found in MacSweeney’s personal library, the presence of *Station Island* establishes that he was aware that Heaney had translated *Suibne Geilt*.

MacSweeney did not learn about Suibne from Heaney: he had been familiar with the story since 1973 at least, when he wrote the now-lost poem ‘Pelt Feather Log’. If MacSweeney read *Sweeney Astray* in order to familiarise himself with the story, he has covered his tracks. Indeed, it is telling that, having drawn many analogies between himself and Suibne throughout his career, when MacSweeney writes what is in effect his version of Suibne’s story, he renames his speaker ‘Finnbar’. The fact that we do not recognise Finnbar’s name from the history books adds greater poignancy to his tale, but more importantly, the name ‘Finnbar’ is a cod-Irish version of ‘Barry’: MacSweeney’s nickname was ‘Bar’ and Finn is probably a reference to Finn McCool, the Ulster giant who created the Giant’s Causeway. MacSweeney has highlighted a reference to Finn McCool in the Foreword to *Preoccupations*, which is the only other book of Heaney’s in MacSweeney’s personal library. MacSweeney has the 1984 edition: presumably he read it at the same time as *Station Island*, during a short-lived period of enthusiasm for Heaney.

MacSweeney underlines three other passages in his copy of *Preoccupations*. In each case, MacSweeney highlights passages quoted by other authors: first, the anti-Protestant childhood rhyme ‘Up the long ladder and down the short rope/ To hell with King Billy and

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75 See Seamus Heaney, ‘Sweeney Redivivus’, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984) pp.95-121
76 Seamus Heaney, ‘The First Kingdom’, *Station Island*, p.101
77 I have been unable to trace this poem, but it is mentioned several times in MacSweeney’s correspondence. Perhaps he simply changed the title.
God bless the Pope'; 79 second, Carson McCullers's remark that 'to know who you are, you have to have a place to come from'; 80 and third, a quotation from Patrick Kavanagh: 'Now that I analyse myself I realize [sic] that throughout everything I write, there is this constantly returning motif of the need to go back. ... So it is for these reasons that I return to the local newspapers. Who has died? Who has sold his farm?' 81 MacSweeney is not interested in what Heaney has to say, so much as where Heaney comes from and how he uses local details and childhood memories as reference points. This may be a sign of MacSweeney's ambition to supplant Heaney, or at least present an alternative map of similar territory: he had previously tried a similar tactic in his reading of Bunting's precursors.

I will now consider the reasons both poets were drawn to the Suibne myth. As king, Suibne fears no one, not even God. He enjoys power, authority, earthly prestige, courage, love, a home and a family. When Ronan curses him to a bird's fearfulness, he loses all of these things. Loss of agency and a compulsion to record your suffering emerge as necessary conditions for poetic inspiration. Alone, homeless and naked, the only 'kingly' characteristic Suibne retains is his pride. When Suibne initially goes out angrily looking for Ronan, his wife Éorann tries to hold him back. She snatches at his cloak, and his cloakclasp breaks: he runs out, stark naked, looking for revenge. It is significant that Suibne's cloakclasp breaks: the sign of pride and prestige that MacSweeney harps on obsessively in Ranter. Suibne attacks Ronan and the other clerics naked (Ranters were also associated with nudity because of their supposedly licentious lifestyle and their nude protests) until Ronan 'clothes' him in feathers. Suibne's anger, which led to his being cursed, now reveals itself in a pathological inability to trust anyone. He accuses Lynchseachan, his half-brother who tries to coax him back to sanity, of mocking him. 82 The poet is misunderstood in turn: a cleric accuses him of stealing his watercress ('Aren't you the contented one?') 83, his fellow madman Alan thinks Suibne is a spy for the king, and a madwoman runs scared from him as he from her. Suibne then moves fearfully from place to place: his wanderings are circular, repetitious and aimless.

79 Seamus Heaney, 'Mossbawn', Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978, p.25
80 'The Sense of Place', Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978, p.135
81 Patrick Kavanagh, quoted in Seamus Heaney, 'The Sense of Place', Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978, p.139 MacSweeney's return to local newspapers was even more emphatic than Kavanagh's: he returned to write for them.
83 Ibid., p.74
In the closing stanzas, Suibne asks for forgiveness (he has not explicitly asked before, but has always appeared to accept his punishment as inevitable: 'it was my destiny') and is called 'a king, a Saint, a Holy Fool'. Prior to this surprise ending, we should consider how much time Suibne spent near churches: both his first and his final flight are to trees near churches. He does not take refuge in the wild like Ranter, but on the edges of civilisation. He is a watcher, exiled but near at hand and still able to observe. Despite admitting his guilt, accepting his punishment ('Almighty God, I deserved this'), and forgiving those whom he once thought treacherous, when Suibne tries to return to his people, Ronan vindictively requests that God renew His curse. Ranter also suggests that a poet's life will be a dissipated, rootless affair, marked by alienation from friends and family.

In his introduction to Sweeney Astray, Heaney gives his reasons for translating the Suibne myth. Although Heaney does not identify with Suibne as explicitly as MacSweeney does, Heaney acknowledges that Suibne is 'a figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance'. MacSweeney would surely agree that Suibne constitutes an early example of the poete maudit. Heaney defines Suibne's historical context as containing 'tension between the newly dominant Christian ethos and the older, recalcitrant Celtic temperament'. Thus, having been punished for a religious transgression, Suibne comes to understand: 'Christ ordained my bondage/ and exhaustion.' This is the position Ranter moves towards, and which Finnbar states explicitly: that of accepting punishment for wrongdoing. Heaney's 'fundamental relation' with Suibne is 'topographical': Heaney lived for thirty years very close to where Suibne's kingdom had been (County Antrim and County Down). MacSweeney relocates the action to Northumberland: an intimate understanding of the landscapes being described is clearly essential if the translation is going to work. Finally, Heaney mentions a family of tinkers, also called Suibne, who camped on the road to the first school he attended. Heaney takes seriously such coincidences: 'One way or another, he seemed to have been with me from the start'. MacSweeney would claim an even greater

84 Ibid., p.30
85 Ibid, p.71
86 Ibid, p.66
87 Ibid, p.vi
88 Ibid, p. v-vi
89 Ibid, p.24
90 Ibid, p.vii
91 Ibid, p.viii
kinship, and would explore the various connotations of his name in later poems such as 'Sweeno, Sweeno'.

MacSweeney could find nowhere to go after his imaginary Ireland, and six years of depression, alcoholism and writer's block ensued. However, after that, and apparently out of nowhere, his best work emerged: *Pearl* and *Demons*. These two collections are by some way MacSweeney's best work and although neither stylistically resembles *Ranter* or 'Finnbar's Lament', both are built on the ground those poems have cleared. In *Pearl*, the Northumbrian territory that MacSweeney had synthetically assembled out in *Ranter* is augmented by personal memory and experience; the poem's access to the medieval world of the Perle poet is guaranteed by *Ranter*. Likewise, a poem like 'Sweeno, Sweeno' from *The Book of Demons* comes to us authorised by the Suibne connection asserted in 'Finnbar's Lament'. In these late works, MacSweeney transforms a synthetic heritage into poetry of great authority.

*Ranter and Politics*

We have seen how the artistic restlessness of Bunting and MacSweeney led to both poets suffering artistic neglect from the official poetry establishment in England. This profoundly influenced the way both poets used Northumberland to construct an alternative history and kingdom. Tony Lopez argues that Bunting wanted 'to construct Northumbria as a proud and hard kingdom ... in a time when the old industrial basis of the North East's economy has been undermined'. 92 In 1984, when MacSweeney was writing *Ranter*, North East industries were under a far more sustained attack, so we would expect the issue of Northumbrian identity to be fraught. I will now consider the extent to which *Ranter* can be read as a political poem.

*Ranter* occupies a broad canvas, dealing with issues of governance, control and boundary making. It cross-references wildly, rarely staying in one historical period for more than a stanza. The historical referents are to be understood as fragments of a single character: if not unity, there is some continuity behind the surface swerving. According to *Ranter*,

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92 Tony Lopez, p.152-3
revolutionary energy gathers around nodal points every few hundred years. The poem's historical boundaries are marked by fleeting references to Hadrian in C1st, and some references to contemporary political machinations: 'another project running over budget. / Men in the know/ chewing ends off cigars...'93 and 'I have ordered the turning off of fountains/ in the Alpine park// floodlights dimming'.94

The reader assumes that Ranter is drawing a parallel between the popular dissent of the seventeenth century and the political landscape of the 1980s; but this may be to assume too much. MacSweeney's primary source for information on the English revolution is the work of Christopher Hill, especially The World Turned Upside Down, and he has underlined the passages in which Hill summarises the gains made by the English revolution, such as the abolition of feudal tenures, arbitrary taxation and prerogative courts; and the establishment of property rights and political power to the propertied. Hill calls these developments 'the triumph of the protestant ethic', and suggests that England might have undergone a far more radical revolution, had revolt been directed by the underground movements of popular protest, such as the Levellers, the Ranters or the Diggers. MacSweeney highlights Hill's summative speculation:

There was, however, another revolution which never happened, though from time to time it threatened. This might have established communal property, a far wider democracy in political and legal institutions, might have disestablished the state church and rejected the protestant ethic. [...] Now that the protestant ethic itself, the greatest achievement of European bourgeois society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is at last being questioned after a rule of three or four centuries, we can study with a new sympathy the Diggers, the Ranters, and the many other daring thinkers who in the seventeenth century refused to bow down and worship it.95

The failure of the radicals to implement their agrarian programmes led to the loss of common land and the destruction of the peasantry. English society would be based on competitive individualism; the country would grow wealthier; its population would increase rapidly; and England would subdue its immediate neighbours with acts of union. These developments prepared England for the Industrial revolution and laid the foundations for the British Empire. Hill suggests that the popular revolt of the C17th has particular resonance for contemporary

93 'Ranter', p.141
94 Ibid., p.152
95 Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) p.15. MacSweeney was clearly a fan of Hill's work; he has a copy of almost all of his books; sometimes multiple copies.
society because he knows he is writing at a time when the British Empire is dissolving and 'Britain' is just beginning to sound anachronistic.

MacSweeney's declared political antecedents are the most radical popular groups of dissenters, but the ethos of the poem is more conservative. Although MacSweeney name-checks the radical groups, his Ranter persona has more in common with the mainstream Protestant ethos of the revolution than with groups such as Levellers, Diggers or Ranters. Much of Ranter exhibits the secularised Protestant fear of social upheaval, for Ranter seems to be in a state of permanent panic and uncertainty: like Hobbes's man in the state of nature, his life is a lonely, rootless affair; nasty, brutish and short; a war of all against all. By contrast, Ken Smith's Fox is a much livelier character, quicker to seize on a minor victory when he can, quicker to laugh at the chaos in which he finds himself, or turn it to his advantage. We can connect this to the way Ranter presents itself as an uncompromising, visionary poem, but is in fact embarrassingly dependent on other poems and poets. This is the knotty irony at the heart of Ranter: MacSweeney is declaring his solidarity with dissenters and rebels, and pledging his allegiance to the radical energies that drive his own best creations – and yet he does not convince because his manner of doing so is derivative, and the poem is not, ultimately, one of his best creations. In a poem, to tell a truth without conviction is far worse than merely lying. Pretending to be Ken Smith is forgivable; pretending to be oneself is not.

MacSweeney's divided feelings about conservative and radical Protestantism reflect his background: he was born and raised in Benwell, a few miles from the city centre of Newcastle, where he would go to the John Knox Presbyterian Church in West Denton with his mother. But he spent weekends and holidays at his grandparents' home in Sparty Lea, where he would go to St John's church in Allendale and hear Pastor Cook preach 'hellfire'. This urban-conservative, rural-radical dichotomy has always been true of Newcastle and Northumberland: Northumbrian earls frequently sided with Scottish forces when they marched on Newcastle; in 1642, Charles I garrisoned the city to control the coal trade, and the city became a Royalist enclave; and during the English Revolution, Newcastle was an island of Presbyterianism in the midst of many more radical dissenting groups, particularly

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Familists, Quakers and Lollards. MacSweeney was drawn to Hill’s speculation about the more radical revolution that never happened because it mirrored the dichotomy within his own beliefs.

Ranter’s references to the fourteenth century uprising known as the Peasants’ Revolt also fail to make plain the contemporary parallels they imply. MacSweeney’s primary source for this period was Christopher Hampton’s *A Radical Reader: the struggle for change in England 1381 – 1914*, which he has carefully highlighted. Following the Black Death, there was a high demand for labourers, who agitated for better wages. This prompted parliament to publish the 1349 Statute of Labourers, which fixed wage levels and made refusal of labour illegal. The measure prompted further unrest, which in turn led to harsher laws until, in 1381, the Men of Kent, under Wat Tyler, marched on London. The obvious contemporary parallel is the way high inflation in 1972 led to workers in nationalised industries to demand wage increases. Early victories (the miners’ strike of 1974 led to the three day week and to Edward Heath calling and losing a general election) were ultimately wiped out as the wage deflation row spilled over into the 80s and Mrs Thatcher hit upon the idea of destroying the industry altogether and replacing it with a self-perpetuating underclass disallowed free school milk. When Arthur Scargill called for strike action from all NUM members on March 12 1984, he and the pickets were demonised in the Tory press as ‘the enemy within’. Scargill’s oft-repeated prediction that the government wanted to destroy the mining industry was dismissed as paranoid radical ranting.

Once again, MacSweeney underplays the contemporary equivalents, and makes no direct references to the miner’s strike of 1984. This seems perverse: the front cover of *Black Torch* had depicted striking miners in 1840 living in the wild, seemingly anticipating Ranter. But the *Black Torch* project had been abandoned. Lines such as ‘Call him Leveller, Lollard,/ his various modes’ imply that the progress won through the historical struggles of oppressed communities can be assigned not to Socialist collective endeavour but the self-assertion of heroic individuals.

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97 See Hill, pp.77-78
99 ‘Ranter’, p.140
The political dimension disappears altogether in the final section, 'Flamebearer', in which Ranter addresses his bride, his voice already modulating into that of Finnbar, before allowing her to speak the final pages alone. Andrew Duncan writes:

*Ranter* starts out by seeming to be a political poem, like *Black Torch*, but resolves itself as an individualistic poem, about a rebel figure and about the failure of his marriage... the references to history are there as explanations, not as primary sequences themselves... The hero feels himself disintegrating as his marriage breaks up, and uses his remarkable knowledge of history to give him reassurance about the survival of identity across time.100

Even Clive Bush, who tends to stress the political aspect of MacSweeney's work, admits that *Ranter* is 'less concerned with the actual political culture and society of the seventeenth-century than with the world turned upside down. He constructs in *Ranter* a folk figure of desire, one who belongs more to the visionary side of a Winstanley, rather than to the more politically-engaged Leveller'.101

Draft manuscripts of *Ranter* support the view that the poem was driven by personal, autobiographical concerns rather than politics. For example, one section of 'Ranter' ends with these cryptic lines:

the lost darling
words and letters
drifting on the wind
four for the condition
six for her name102

An earlier draft explains what is being counted here:

one for L
one for O
one for V
one for E
four for the condition

100 Duncan, p.138
102 'Ranter', p.153
In the final version, MacSweeney omits the reference to counting the letters in the word 'love' (the woman to whom the poem is addressed is Lesley, hence the six letters of her name). This suggests that MacSweeney has attempted to foreground the political element to mask the true subject of the poem: a failed relationship.

We have noted MacSweeney's habit of asserting a strong biographical reading subsequent to the poem. Andrew Duncan writes

One of the things [MacSweeney] said when I interviewed him was that in 1979 he gave up on the possibility of external success in the literary world, or of political change in Britain, and withdrew into himself. He retreated to a fellside cottage to write Ranter, and when he had finished he counted seventy empty wine bottles in the cottage, and realised he was an alcoholic.104

As usual, MacSweeney's biographical account is misleading: he skips over 'Colonel B', Jury Vet and related texts, claiming that after Black Torch, the next major work is Ranter. He does not mention that he moved into the fellside cottage with his new wife, nor that Ranter was written in the aftermath of his failed marriage. He implies that Ranter was written after he had given up on hope of literary success; in fact it was an attempt to court such success. Framing Ranter in terms of his alcoholism (and citing political reasons for his drink problem) connects the poem to Demons. MacSweeney is asserting Ranter as a pivotal point in his biography: after this point he begins to project himself as the hero of his poetry much more directly.

The self-projection we associate with Demons is already underway in Ranter: much of the poem's anger stems from alcoholic self-disgust, suggesting some level of self-awareness prior to the writing of the poem. At one point he describes an alcoholic black out (a period of unremembered activity in which the individual remains conscious and verbal), followed by waking covered in vomit and blood and trying to piece together what has happened:

Ranter upright
on the sofa

103 Archive: BM: 1/13/4
104 Duncan, p.129
Bloodcake shirt
vomitbib drying

... waking: This is not possible 105

Later, the speaker tells us he has been 'winedrunk from day one', 106 that his resentment is 'rising like liquor', 107 and that he has lived for five years 'drink to drink'. 108 After Ranter's comprehensive cross-referencing of working class history, Ranter's Bride pointedly ignores the political dimension and in 'Snipe Drumming' states her case more simply: 'You were drunk. // I didn't like/ it much.' 109

The most political section of Ranter is 'Ranter's Reel', but even here political references jostle with more personal demons. Ranter addresses his enemy with mock-familiarity:

Listen Pal
Compadre
Colleague
Friend
Listen Dad
Lord
I know thee

you've had it

Check your children
in their pink cribs 110

The addressee is indeterminate, and subsequent images may relate either to the speaker's threat to kill his master's children or to his own childlessness, which is presented as a means of symbolically killing his father by refusing to continue the family line: 'Your seed has reached/ a dead end.' 111 If Ranter's habitual mode is the threat, it is the threat of a surly slave

105 'Ranter', p.154
106 Ibid., p.156
107 'Snipe Drumming', p.159
108 'Flamebearer', p.171
109 'Snipe Drumming', p.160
110 'Ranter's Reel', p.169
111 Ibid., p.169
who fantasises about withholding his labour, holding his oppressors in judgment, and speaking or writing against them. He rarely describes himself taking more aggressive action. An earlier draft of the poem included the following lines:

I was there, mate.
I know.
I had a hammer
in my hands
and I was mad, mad, mad.¹¹²

These lines were cut from the final poem: while the image of Ranter as a Luddite wrecking a loom is fitting, it would be out of character for him to engage actively with his enemy. Instead of killing his father (as the speaker does in strong poems such as ‘The Last Bud’ or ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’), Ranter modulates into Finnbar, who returns in defeat to his father/captor.

The section beginning ‘Dear Christ’ contains Ranter’s argument in an abbreviated form:

Dear Christ
what kind of kingdom

People standing in the fields all day
in the rain
doing nothing
leaning on sticks
glaring, miserable

resentment filling
their chapped bodies

afraid of everyone

and themselves

flexing wolfmuscles
feathertips turning
snipe drumming
gin-trap sex
climbing above her
clamping in loveclasps

¹¹² Archive: BM: 1/13/4
dog in his rage
vixen in heat

This section takes the form of a glissade, from God to King to Countrymen. The labourers are without work; resentful and fearful of each other and themselves. Tension is relieved through sex and sexual display. This trajectory accords with one version of MacSweeney's life up to this point: he has presented himself as child Prince of Sparty Lea, choirboy and cross-bearer, communist, then taking refuge from political disappointments in alcohol and sex. The political resentment of the labourers is portrayed as a form of earthly suffering mid-way between an unobtainable heaven ('dear Christ') and sinful pleasure ('vixen in heat'). The context is ultimately religious. MacSweeney was more interested in damnation and redemption than in politics, and his next sequence would be a reckoning for his past sins: *Hellhound Memos.*

113 'Ranter', p.149
Chapter Five: At the Crossroads, 1986 – 93

In this chapter I will consider the fourth stage of MacSweeney's trauma adjustment: depression. Following Ranter's failure to find a major publisher and wider audience, MacSweeney published nothing for seven years. During this time he wrote little, and nothing of value. MacSweeney eventually returned to print with *Hellhound Memos* a fragile text that displays many of the detrimental signs of depression, but that also includes several significant advances in theme, structure and relation to antecedents. I consider the paradox of disabling/enabling depression in terms of Julia Kristeva’s theories and blues mythology, and show how the blues’s stress on performance enables MacSweeney to resolve his social-collectivist/heroic-individualist dialectic. In *Memos*, MacSweeney also begins to take on stronger father-figures such as Bob Dylan; and we see the first appearance of the 'little girl' who will evolve into Pearl. Depression is often a last attempt to avoid confronting a traumatic crisis, and so it proved for MacSweeney: he emerged from this period prepared to write his best work: *Pearl* and *Demons*.

'No Mercy' (1986 – 1990)

In 1993, Elaine Randell visited Durham to read at Colpitts. After the reading, she asked Jackie Litherland if she was in touch with MacSweeney, who lived nearby and had been working for the *Shields Gazette* for the past eight years. Like most, Litherland was not even aware that MacSweeney had moved back to the North East:

...I said 'Nobody knows he's here.' And [Randell] said 'No, he's become very reclusive, in fact he pulls out his phone for long periods of time and won't talk to people.' ...Barry loved talking to people on the phone so it was obviously quite serious. You must get the picture of Barry being very isolated. [...] He was very shy, with bursts of anger.

'Shy with bursts of anger' sounds equally applicable to the mute, illiterate Pearl, and Pearl’s origins can be found in this period when MacSweeney, having feared and courted isolation

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2 Jackie Litherland interview.
all of his life, finally achieved it for several years. 1985 was MacSweeney's nadir: frustrated by the small press circuit, MacSweeney pinned his hopes for a larger publisher and a new audience on *Ranter*. MacSweeney had reinvented himself as a poet, created a new persona and written his most considered work to date, only to be turned down. His bargain had failed, and depression followed. 'Finnbar's Lament', published in 1986, is perhaps the most direct, sustained and unified poem MacSweeney had written since 'The Last Bud' and it occupies a similar position to the earlier masterpiece, signalling both a triumphant mastery of materials and the decision to abandon them. Still living in Bradford, in October 1985 MacSweeney took the job of Shipping/Industrial correspondent on the *Shields Gazette* and moved back to the North East, living with his mother until she found an ex-council house for him in a nearby street. Litherland describes him at this time: 'His emotional life collapsed in that period. The second marriage was such a terrible experience, the break-up, that I think he had a breakdown.'

The *Shields Gazette* is a much smaller newspaper than the *Telegraph and Argus*. MacSweeney's career ambitions had evidently shrunk along with his hopes of political change, literary success and personal happiness. His alcoholism intensified at this time but, despite the infamously close connection between journalism and alcohol, MacSweeney denies that they were related in his case:

> I'd very rarely go to the pub after work because I wrote all the time at home. [...] I drank at home where you don't have the encouragement of closing time. If you get drunk you are not going to fall down in the street. It started with solitary drinking but really the alcoholism came in the last eight or nine years when I was alone. I've been twice married and twice divorced.

Typically, MacSweeney aligns his alcoholism to fit the context: this interview was to promote *Demons*, so MacSweeney wanted his alcoholism to signal his lone-wolf poet persona rather than his career as a journalist. Nevertheless, it is true that MacSweeney avoided drinking socially with his colleagues: Terry Kelly, his closest friend at the *Shields Gazette*, confirms that MacSweeney's alcoholism went unnoticed for several years:

This was late 80s, early 90s. Barry at that point was increasingly prone to throwing sickies and not turning up. He was either very diligent and would be there before the

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3 Jackie Litherland interview.
4 MacSweeney, quoted in David Whetstone, 'A thirst to survive that helped beat the demons' in *The Journal* (25.11.97) p.11 Archive: Box 16
rest of the subs – either that or he’d be ringing in sick. So that meant there were gaps on the subs desk. He was subbing as well as being deputy editor. So this caused Kie [Kie Miskelly, the editor] no end of problems. Barry’s standard sickie line was ‘I’ve been up all night’. He probably was! He would claim it was a fish, or a curry, and he’d been poorly, but clearly [in retrospect] it was from drink. But at that time, none of the other reporters would have thought that it was drink related. We never thought that at the time. I just thought it was Barry being poetic and eccentric and unreliable.5

MacSweeney worked closely with the editor of the Shields Gazette, Kie Miskelly, who was an old friend from the Penrith Observer. Apart from that, MacSweeney was an isolated figure: his interest in poetry and his ‘trouble with the women’ was enough to ensure he appeared wildly eccentric: ‘Mad MacSweeney’ as he was known. MacSweeney retained the habits of the news editor he had been in Bradford, and would sometimes drive the other journalists. He was ‘not especially well-liked’ and did not socialise with his colleagues:

He wasn’t the most popular man in the world. When he was news editor for a time, he was one of those guys where there was never a break. He’d be in early, never took a lunch break, was a workaholic. I think he tried to live up to the image he’d had at Bradford, at the Telegraph and Argus, as the hardened journo bit. I think he liked that image of himself. It was part of that myth-making thing Barry had. He liked to keep people at a distance, and that was part of it. He could be hard on people; he was a swine to me sometimes! He could be quite cutting.6

According to Litherland, the working hours of the Shields Gazette helped MacSweeney maintain a double life:

Because it was an evening paper, he’d be home by four, and then he’d start drinking. […] And they didn’t know he drank, because he didn’t drink at lunchtime when they might drink. He was very good at keeping up a front.7

After ‘Finnbar’s Lament’ MacSweeney published nothing for seven years: his longest gap between publications. This was due to a period of writer’s block in which, although he continued to write, the work was not up to standard. During this time he worked on a long political poem called ‘No Mercy’, allegedly about Margaret Thatcher (Terry Kelly believes it is aimed at a more immediate target: Ian Holland, editor of the Shields Gazette; this would also explain the title of the subsequent Memos which refers to a journalist’s memo

5 Terry Kelly interview.
6 Terry Kelly interview.
7 Jackie Litherland interview.
from an editor rather than a business memo\textsuperscript{8}). Friends such as Gordon D Brown\textsuperscript{9} were frank about ‘No Mercy’s shortcomings, and MacSweeney was unable to find a magazine willing to publish it.\textsuperscript{10} The closest MacSweeney received to a positive response was from Eric Mottram, who called the poem a ‘call to arms’. However, Mottram’s letter of appraisal is descriptive rather than critical and remains carefully neutral.\textsuperscript{11} This period lasted seven years, though MacSweeney later referred to it as his ‘bleak decade’ (even here, we see the journalistic instinct to sensationalise). According to Litherland, ‘[MacSweeney] said that none of the work that he did at that time was any good. He was a very stern critic of his own work’.

The extant drafts of ‘No Mercy’ in Litherland’s possession show a poem of about ten pages in four sections. Alternate lines are indented, so its appearance resembles ‘The Last Bud’ or Autumn Journal. The poem is an attempt to combine Ranter’s emotional directness with the socio-political impulse behind ‘Wild Knitting’ and to dispense with masks and personae. Most of the lines have been crossed out in red ink, and in the margins MacSweeney has written criticism, some of which is attributed to Paul McSweeney or Elaine Randell. ‘No Mercy’ ends with the word ‘Albion’, which MacSweeney has replaced with ‘England’, noting: ‘Too Blakean and not enough MacSweeney.’ This lack of confidence is remarkable since MacSweeney had recently referred to England as Albion in ‘Wild Knitting’, and would call England ‘Jerusalem’ in Memos. Litherland thinks it shows he knew he hadn’t made the vocabulary of the poem his own:

[MacSweeney] felt he ought to write about this [ie. about Thatcherism in ‘No Mercy’]. He was passionately against it. But there was nothing to create a mask for him that he could write within. There’s no form here that he’s comfortable with. It’s trapped in a void of ‘correct’ writing. It’s not able to have any clothes.\textsuperscript{12}

That last comment accords nicely with the dandyism and flair of MacSweeney’s best work.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{8} I thank Litherland for pointing out this distinction.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{9} Brown wrote to MacSweeney 6.12.88, with his second critique of ‘No Mercy’, saying the poem was still not up to scratch. Archive: Box 16}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} For example, Tim Fletcher (editor of First Offence) sent a rejection slip dated 5.2.89, criticising ‘No Mercy’ as uneven, but encouraging MacSweeney to send other work to the magazine. Archive: Box 16}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Letter from Eric Mottram to Barry MacSweeney dated 26.7.88 Archive: Box 16}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} Jackie Litherland interview.}
MacSweeney's failure to bring 'No Mercy' to life is connected to his abandonment of political poetry in the 70s: as we have seen, he tended to write Socialist, collectivist poems when he was undergoing a crisis of confidence in the role and value of his work. After the publication of Demons, MacSweeney again began to worry that he had written himself out, and again considered returning to political poetry: 'He had a project in 1997 or 98 to write about the miners, to follow up Black Torch.'\textsuperscript{13} Despite some talk of writing to NUM to see if they would commission the project, MacSweeney never wrote this poem.

**Hellhound Memos (1993)**

Clarksdale, Mississippi: Robert Johnson meets the devil at the crossroads and sells his soul in return for fame and fortune as the greatest bluesman who ever lived. It is the founding myth of rock n' roll, and the devil is in the detail: Johnson's fame came posthumously and the fortune went to the white men who secured the copyright on his songs. More prosaically, we can imagine Robert Johnson, chased out of town by whites, reaching the crossroads at midnight and not knowing which way to run. In both stories, the crossroads confronts the wanderer with the illusory nature of his choices: all are equally treacherous. At this moment, the crossroads became a key symbol in rock-star mythology.

The poems MacSweeney wrote as he began to emerge from depression and writer's block were published as *Hellhound Memos* in 1993. These poems return repeatedly to the figure of the lost man at the crossroads, though the setting has been transposed to contemporary Newcastle:

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Chapped fingers play the bottleneck
at Gallowgate crossroads
where we have lost Robert Johnson to some deep connection
down the hellhound trail...\textsuperscript{14}
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The bottleneck refers to a blues guitar slide, punning on the bottleneck of traffic at Gallowgate, and to drinking in public. Because the 'chapped fingers' are kept in the passive,

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} ['[19]', p.192
we cannot tell whether the speaker refers to his own or to someone else’s drinking. Perhaps, in keeping with the over-identification elsewhere in *Memos*, the speaker has seen an alcoholic wandering the streets and instinctively identified with him. The vignette displays two characteristics of the blues that attracted MacSweeney. First, the blues are a working class form: there are many blues sung by the victims of judges, tax inspectors, or even dentists, but no blues are ever sung by these figures. The singer is one of the exploited, even when celebrating a minor victory such as duping someone out of money or cheating on a partner. Second, the blues are always self-orientated. Almost all objects and natural phenomena fulfil a dual role, asking to be read on a descriptive, realist plane and on a symbolic plane relating to the singer’s state of mind: a sunset might lead to the line ‘I hate to see the evening sun go down. / It makes me feel I’m on my last go round’\(^\text{15}\), and a reference to fishing (one of the few simple, free pleasures available to any black person) invariably contains an innuendo referring to infidelity (‘someone been fishin’ in my pond’\(^\text{16}\)). Likewise, in *Memos* the Gallowgate crossroads or the B&Q store demand to be read both in terms of a specific urban-realistic setting and as a portal to a surreal parallel world. We are returned to the familiar question of whether to take this for a ‘real’ city or a city of the mind. Is the poet a consumer or a producer of these horrors?

*Memos* is transitional: the poems open the seam of dark, sardonic humour that will be fully explored in *Demons*, and they also contain a strong measure of lament that connects them with MacSweeney’s preceding work and with the subsequent *Pearl*. The central theme of the *Memos* is the need to pay for your sins, and the reckoning applies the brutal logic of the blues. MacSweeney weighs the human cost of the rampant consumption he indulged in his life and poetry, just as England must face the consequences of its political choices. The fallen society is not described so much as dramatised through a multiplicity of voices and registers that include advertising shtick, blues motifs, cookery instructions, tabloid sloganeering and the stilted officialese of police reports. However, switching between registers does not add up to an argument, and in calling these poems memos, MacSweeney suggests they are disposable notices of developments happening elsewhere. *Memos* did little to abate

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\(^{15}\) See W.C. Handy, ‘The St Louis Blues’. The line was used in many other songs.

\(^{16}\) Robert Johnson, ‘Dead Shrimp Blues’, *The Complete Recordings* (Sony, 1996)
MacSweeney's anxiety, which persisted throughout the writing of *Pearl*, and I will now explore the ways in which this uncertainty is felt in the text of *Memos*.

I will begin by considering MacSweeney's various accounts of the origin of *Memos*. He tended to recount variations on the same basic story, belying his uncertainty over what the poems were trying to do. MacSweeney gave Litherland the tragic version, telling her that he began the sequence while visiting his brother in Dunton, Bedfordshire:

The key moment for him was when he went down to see his brother, who he was very close to. Barry regarded Paul and his family as a very stable unit, and called Lynn [Paul's wife] his 'adored sister.' [...] It was during one of those visits either he drank too much or had some kind of crisis, and he ran away from where they were staying and got lost somehow at, well, he said at a crossroads or a roundabout, and he just broke down and cried and cried and cried at this place of no-place, and eventually his brother found out where he was and came and picked him up. Barry said that was the turning point for him. And that persona went into the *Hellhound Memos*, the lost person at the crossroads.

MacSweeney refers to this incident, though in a very different, comic mode, at a reading:

There's a crossroads at Dunton and ... there's a famous song by blues singer Robert Johnson called 'Hellhound On My Trail,' and I was listening to this as we went past and my brother was telling me, 'You see that housing estate at Dunton crossroads?' and I looked and there's this executive housing estate. 'It was built on one of the biggest Saxon burial grounds in Britain.' There was a public enquiry and Barratts or whoever it was got the go-ahead to do it. So - what's that film? [...] *Poltergeist*, thankyou - we were all talking about how in three years time they're all going to be sitting down to Christmas dinner and suddenly Saxon warriors will rise. So these are *Hellhound Memos*.

MacSweeney tells this story complete with comic sound effects, but the motif of the family unit destroyed by a reckoning for past sins is telling. The film reference is prescient: *Poltergeist* is a family melodrama disguised as a horror film. At the same reading, MacSweeney gives yet another explanation of where the *Memos* came from:

What started me writing again was the Meadowell riots last summer in North Shields. A grim housing estate on North Tyneside, which no doubt you've heard about. The

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17 According to MacSweeney, we only have *Pearl* because the first six poems went down well at a reading; and according to Jackie, MacSweeney took every suggestion she made for editing the crucial last poem in the sequence: both instances imply an extreme suggestibility on MacSweeney's part. This was out of character to say the least: in 1968, MacSweeney's refusal to edit his work had led to his long exile from the mainstream.
North East at the moment... whereas it used to have a reputation for building ships, giving the world electricity, giving the world coal – ha! – heavy engineering etcetera, there isn’t any of that now. It gives the world joy riders and ram raiders.¹⁸

The Meadowell riots took place on 9.9.91. Meadowell is a North Shields housing estate of about 2,000 homes. In 1991 it had been an extremely deprived area with high unemployment for many years. The immediate cause of the riots was the deaths of two young men, Colin Atkins and Dale Robson, who crashed the car they had stolen while being chased by police. A false rumour circulated that the police had deliberately run them off the road. Roads into the estate were barricaded with cut down trees, the community centre was torched and local shops were looted and burned. At the height of the riots, more than 400 people fought with the police. Thirty seven were arrested and one man was jailed for four and a half years. Ethnic minorities bore the brunt of the attacks since they owned most of the local shops; this may have been part of the rioters’ agenda.

Can any of MacSweeney’s explanations be trusted? Each depends on a biographical context that the poems withhold. There are no explicit references to the Meadowell riots in Memos (though the shell-suited ‘multiplex moron’ is a caricature of the rioters) and most of the Memos poems were written between July and September 1992: a year after the riots. By combining MacSweeney’s various explanations of how Memos originated, we arrive at a description of the most characteristic tone and attitude of the blues: a mixture of horror, dark comedy and anxious uncertainty, in which a sense of personal failure stemming from internalised political defeats gives rise to irrational, compulsive behaviour.

Anxiety differs from fear in that it lacks an object, but this does not stop the anxious person trying to find one; this compulsion is part of the condition, and is related to other compulsive actions: the deluded, self-medicating alcoholic poet hopes to find the answer in ‘just one more drink’ or ‘just one more poem’. As the speaker of Memos casts about for the source of his unspecified distress, everyday mundanities appear malevolent. The reader, from a safe distance, might appreciate MacSweeney’s use of crystal coupon goblets and references to B&Q as witty signifiers of the compulsory, repetitive over-consumption that characterises late capitalist society; but this perspective does not appear available to the speaker himself, to whom the amassed objects of his synthetic desires are sources of horror:

¹⁸ Barry MacSweeney reading his poems.
Hellhound, thee with vast purchase, off, off!
my siren, my knocker, my foghorn, my bell.
Off my loose nails, my gate furniture, my slide
action latch, my epoxy-coated wire hasp, my B&Q
gate bolt, my free delivered catalogue.  

The repeated 'my' suggests a sad, residual pride in his acquisitions – he has evidently made
'vast purchase' – but the irony of the word 'purchase' shows what a construction this speaker is: it refers both to the speaker's attempts to lever the immoveable hellhound out of his path, and to 'the annual rent or return from land'. Like the dogs of Albion in 'Wild Knitting' that are seen 'shitting in the beck', the hellhounds are depicted 'carping and crapping' over what had once been common ground. A few lines later, the speaker asserts his connection to John Clare ('I miss my stew-bearing Mary') and to Clare's poems of protest at enclosure (he is 'taxed'). MacSweeney connects the enclosure of common ground in the C17th with the owner-occupier ethos that B&Q uses to market its junk (B&Q thrived during the 80s house-price boom). MacSweeney's historicising is acute: he is contrasting common land with Thatcher-era municipal ground: the former was owned by all and tended by all; the latter is owned by 'nobody', i.e. by the local council, and attracts gangs of bored youths.

In Robert Johnson's blues songs we find a similar pervasive, undefined sense of doom that imbues trivial, everyday distractions with malevolence. Instead of B&Q and petrol coupons, a phonograph, icicles on a tree or a new car can fill the singer with inexplicable dread. Many blues singers have tried to define the blues with lines that begin: 'The blues ain't nothin' but a...' A song by Ida Cox, 'Blues Ain't Nothin' Else But', was advertised as follows: "Oh, the Blues ain't nothin' but a good woman feeling bad" – a slow, aching heart disease – like consumption, it kills you by degrees. Ida Cox, at last, tells what the Blues are! Every verse is a picture. Hear it and discover how many kinds of Blues you've got." It may be impossible to 'define' the blues without imposing a specious refinement of the range of phenomena and emotions that constitute it, but I will now identify some characteristics shared by blues songs.

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19 '[6]', Memos, p.10
20 'Wild Knitting', p.132
21 Advertised by Paramount, 'the popular race record'.
A sense of guilt, passivity, masochism and homelessness are some of characteristics shared by the blues and Memos. Both contain only the negative aspects of an afterlife: positive spiritual references, stemming from the influence of gospel song, are so far removed from traditional blues attitudes that they are given their own genre. Although self-orientated, the blues do not promote insight as a self-evident advantage. Typically, the blues singer has been unfaithful and/or killed someone and/or run away, and s/he don’t know why; where causes are alluded to, they are bad luck, the devil, or other superstitions: the blues, in other words. This circular argument can generate tremendously emotive poetry, but is less adept at addressing wider societal forces. Many commentators have noted the dearth of blues protest songs; the exceptions (Leadbelly's 'Bourgeois Blues', Sleepy John Estes' 'Time is Marching On' or J.B. Lenoir's 'Eisenhower Blues' for example) were not very popular in their day. Paul Oliver notes 'To a large extent [the blues] failed the campaigns of the non-violent demonstrators, the Civil Rights activists and the black militants: in the marches in Alabama and Mississippi, gospel song found a new role, but blues did not'. Michael Haralambos notes the rise and fall in the popularity of the blues mirrors the rise and fall of Jim Crow, the corrupt sharecropping system that was rife in Mississippi, under which black farmers rented land from a white man and then worked for the rest of their lives to pay off the self-perpetuating 'debt' they owed him. As subsequent generations of blacks began to press more openly for change and social conditions gradually improved, the blues declined in popularity. By the mid 60s, the popular black musical forms were gospel, soul, funk and Motown; the blues form had been adopted by white musicians such as The Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds, and their audience was almost exclusively white. This is how MacSweeney first heard the blues, and many of his blues references have been taken from white rock bands from the 60s and 70s such as The Doors, Bob Dylan and Led Zeppelin. The blues' post-Jim Crow decline in popularity among blacks suggests that the form originated as the expression of people who had given up hope of long term progress. This is another reason for its attractiveness to MacSweeney at this time: he had decisively abandoned the polemical, Socialist poem 'No Mercy', in favour of a blues-influenced poetry of individualism. Memos, like the blues, can express anxiety but it cannot rationalise or argue.

22 See, for example, Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968) p.257
23 Ibid., p.xx
24 Michael Haralambos, From Blues to Soul in Black America, 1974, p.71
When social conflict and oppression are internalised, the result is compulsive, irrational behaviour that is inexplicable to the sufferer: 'I mistreat my baby, but I can't see no reason why...' The most pervasive sentiment in the blues is of being in two minds and refusing to commit to either; occasionally, the blues provides a fantasy of self-assertion or escape, often in the form of catching a train, but again this is a symbolic figure: you never hear about what happens when the singer reaches his/her destination; there are no blues songs about getting off a train and starting a new life. The blues are concerned with suffering rather than struggling; the listener can take courage from them but not hope. Memos is MacSweeney's attempt to reinvent himself as this kind of blues hero: a fallen, abject figure who is unable or unwilling to do anything about his condition. The defeatism of the poetry is uncomfortably close to that of the alcoholic trapped in a cycle of drinking, abusive behaviour and self-pity that leads to further drinking: poor me, poor me, pour me a drink.

Memos is filled with allusions to blues songs. These include 'I come down like slate-grey rain' (c.f. 'the blues came down like dark night showers of rain'), 'Trouble on all sides today up and down' ('I Be's Troubled...'), 'I could hear the elderberries crying dew' (c.f. 'Lord, I heard the hoot-owl cryin', I knowed somebody was bound to die), 'The sun was like a bucketful of gold!' (c.f. 'Buckets of rain, buckets of tears'), 'It was a black and handsome' (c.f. 'She gotta special but I believe it's most too light'), 'acid rain/ comes down relentless, Bladerunner-style, breaching/ levee and harbour wall' (c.f. 'If it keeps on raining, the levee gonna break'), 'Die by myself with twin-feeder tubes' (c.f. 'Wouldn't mind dyin' now, baby, but I gotta go by myself'), 'Can the knocking on your trapdoor/ be ignored?' (c.f. 'Can't you hear me, baby, knockin' at your

25 Robert Johnson, 'Me and the Devil Blues'.
26 [3], p.187
27 Blind Willie McTell, 'Dark Night Blues', The Definitive Collection (Sony, 1994)
28 [10], p.189
29 Muddy Waters, 'I Be's Troubled', From Mississippi to Chicago (Prism Leisure Corps., 1999)
30 [11], p.190
32 [12], Memos p.16
33 'Buckets of Rain', Bob Dylan, Blood On the Tracks (Columbia, 1975)
34 [14], Memos, p.18
35 Robert Johnson, '32.20. blues'.
36 [15], Memos, p.19
37 Most famously Led Zeppelin, 'When the Levee Breaks', Led Zeppelin IV (Atlantic, 1971); but many blues songs contain variations on this line.
38 [16], Memos, p.20
40 [17], Memos, p.21
door?" 41) and 'I'll be down at the dock in the morning' 42 (c.f. 'Meet me in the morning' 43). And then there are the hellhounds themselves ('hellhounds horning in the rapefields' 44) named in honour of Robert Johnson, who provides both an epigraph and a cover image. At a further remove are lines such as 'O my knees broke and I sank to my feet', 45 which catch the dark humour of blues lines such as 'been down so long it looks like up to me'. 46 However, perhaps the most important blues reference is also one of the quietest, occurring first in 'Memo 2' and then periodically throughout: it is the word 'Jerusalem', and it proves that, despite MacSweeney's characteristically misleading title, the most significant blues presence in Memos is not Robert Johnson but Bob Dylan.

Amid Memos's many signs of insecurity, 47 the presence of Dylan stands out as a sign of confidence: MacSweeney had never before taken on this precursor, and the coded single-word reference 'Jerusalem' will be followed by Dylan's appearance later in the sequence, and by many more explicit references in Demons. MacSweeney's dedictees usually signify his intended primary readers, and in this case, both are Dylan fanatics: Terry Kelly edits the Dylan fanzine The Bridge 48 and Nicholas Johnson's letters in the Barry MacSweeney Papers 49 show that Dylan appreciation accounted for much of their correspondence. The crucial Dylan reference point for Memos is a song originally intended for the insipid 1983 album Infidels, but eventually released on the 1991 compilation Bootleg Series I-III. The song, one of Dylan's best, is 'Blind Willie McTell' and it opens as follows:

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Seen the arrow on the doorpost
Sayin' this land is condemned
All the way from New Orleans
To Jerusalem.
I travelled through East Texas
Where many martyrs fell
And I know no one sings the blues
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41 Blind Willie McTell, 'Broke Down Engine', The Definitive Collection (Sony, 1994). This song was covered by Bob Dylan on his album World Gone Wrong (Columbia, 1996)
42 '[18]', p.191
43 'Meet Me in the Morning', Bob Dylan, Blood On the Tracks.
44 '[7]', Memos, p.11
45 '[11]', p.190
46 Most famously by The Doors, 'Been Down So Long', L.A. Woman (Elektra/Asylum, 1970)
47 An example of MacSweeney's lack of confidence is the way he pointedly avoids adopting the obvious folk tradition of misery and dissent that was on his doorstep: the border ballads. His eschewal of native Northumbrian art in favour of an American model is part of MacSweeney's shying away from the Bunting-influenced style of Ranter (though, as we shall see, Memos is in many ways a development of that collection).
48 The Bridge is the biggest Dylan fanzine in the UK.
49 See Archive: Box 4
Like Blind Willie McTell.\(^{50}\)

MacSweeney strategically places the key word ‘Jerusalem’ throughout Memos. Like Dylan, he cites it as the quintessential city-beyond-salvation, after Lamentations, in which Jeremiah laments the ruin of Jerusalem which was visited on the Jews for their worship of false idols. Memos was written at a time when MacSweeney had started attending the John Knox Presbyterian church in West Denton with his mother; something that must have reminded him of his childhood experience of listening to Pastor Cook’s ‘hellfire’ preaching in Allendale (where he had been accompanied by his mother and Pearl). Dylan’s use of Jerusalem has reminded MacSweeney of the favourite Protestant trope of England as a modern day Jerusalem, in which God’s chosen people are as undeserving and unheeding as ever.

Mention of Jerusalem inevitably recalls Blake’s famous lines:

I will not cease from Mental Fight,  
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In Englands green & pleasant Land\(^{51}\)

As an ironic counterpoint to Blake’s ‘green & pleasant Land’, MacSweeney presents us with a ‘yellow rape Jerusalem’.\(^{52}\) England has been overrun by the cash-crop oil-seed rape (often abbreviated to ‘rapefield’ in order to maximise its unpleasant associations), or even uglier developments:

Jerusalem has been sold and is a mall  
with cross-Channel counter-culture accountants  
selling rapefield hectares.\(^{53}\)

Like MacSweeney’s other pet-hate B&Q, oilseed rape arrived in Britain in the 80s and proliferated exponentially: it is now our third largest arable crop. Oilseed rape is particularly prone to pests and diseases, and requires multiple herbicides, fungicides and insecticides, making it one of the worst crops for leaching nitrates into waterways: an apt symbol of a


\(^{52}\)‘[5]’, Memos, p.9

\(^{53}\)‘[16]’, Memos, p.20
despoiled land, and an answering image for the cotton fields of ‘Blind Willie McTell’. Dylan imagines America having been corrupted and poisoned by the evil deeds it has hosted over the centuries:

See them big plantations burnin',
Hear the crackin' of the whips,
Smell that sweet magnolia bloomin',
See the ghosts of slavery ships.
There's a chain gang on the highway,
I can hear the rebel yell:
Nobody sings the blues
Like Blind Willie McTell.

While Memos is full of allusions to Dylan and to the blues, MacSweeney does not adopt the form of ‘Blind Willie McTell’ or any other blues song. We can connect this to tendencies throughout MacSweeney’s oeuvre: he does not translate Apollinaire, he ‘collaborates’ with him, and in Odes, when he imitates McClure’s form, he matches it with non-McClure content. This is in keeping with Modernist principles: when translating, Pound refused to impose a pre-set English form on poetry written in a foreign or historical form. In his earliest translations, Pound strove to recreate Cavalcanti’s metres and rhyme schemes in English, but his most celebrated translations are from the Chinese of Li Po, where the original language demanded altogether new forms of English, there being no grammatical or phonetic equivalent for Chinese characters. Dylan brings a similarly robust, respectful and curious attitude to his playing of blues songs. Very few whites are able to sing a blues convincingly because their approach is usually characterised by either a sub-Keith Richards instinct for the lowest common denominator stadium rock riff or, worse, a toe-curlingly reverential impersonation of an ‘authentic’ old blues singer. Both approaches indicate a belief that the value of the blues resides in stylistic gestures which may be appropriated. When the blues is treated as a commodity in this way, an understanding of the original context of the work becomes surplus to requirement: in particular, the blues practice of recycling phrases and imagery (which I consider below) must be disregarded, since it interferes with the promotion and copyrighting of selected ‘genius-artists’ such as Robert Johnson. Dylan’s refrain ‘Nobody sings the blues like Blind Willie McTell’ refers to this lost tradition, and to the

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54 See Barry MacSweeney, Horses in Boiling Blood (Cambridge: Equipage, 2004), which bills itself ‘a collaboration, a celebration’.
55 John Hammond best exemplifies this Muddy-Waters-meets-Al-Jolson style.
culture's inability to register that loss. As we will see in *Pearl* (Chapter Six), MacSweeney frequently alludes to an anterior poem's form, without adopting that form.

At this point, we should acknowledge the extent to which the blues, Dylan and MacSweeney all lend themselves to the process of commoditisation. The bluesy self-mythologising of *Memos* proved to be a successful way for MacSweeney to garner attention: these poems were reviewed and anthologised far more widely than superior work such as *Jury Vet*. Likewise, although their traditions were shared and communal, the blues singers wanted to be famous in their own right. The place of the blues in contemporary culture is paralleled by that of poetry, with a chosen few (in MacSweeney's lifetime, Heaney and Hughes) gaining mass appeal, while the broader tradition is largely ignored. As a marginal figure whose fifteen minutes of fame had passed, MacSweeney was both attracted and repelled by the promotion of 'genius-artists'; hungry for recognition but wary of its terms and conditions. In this sense, the blues context of *Memos* is a development of the pop culture context of *Odes*. Both collections dramatise similar paradoxes: the wish to appear stylish, the flirtation with narcissism, the importance of originality, the importance of tradition, and conflicted feelings about the context-free appropriation of gestures and commodities that are felt to confer prestige. However, where *Odes* invites such paradoxes, *Memos* finds MacSweeney's anxiously worrying over whether he wants to resist or succumb to commoditisation; whether he wishes to place himself in a collective tradition or be received as an individualist genius artist.

I want to explore how the blues' emphasis on repetition and performance helped MacSweeney reconsider these terms. I will begin by considering the place of the individual artist in the communal blues tradition, and the intimate interaction of performer, audience and tradition in the blues. This intimacy is enabled by the existence of a shared pool of images and stock formulations. Michael Taft writes:

Because of the formulaic nature of the blues, ...when a singer sings a phrase or line, both he and his audience recognize that particular part of the song. Perhaps semi-consciously, they compare this specific singing of the phrase with other singings of that phrase and phrases similar to it. In an instant, the singer and his song audience compare the way the sung phrase is juxtaposed with others, both in the song being
sung and in other songs... Thus, every phrase in the blues has the potential of a literary richness far beyond its specific usage in one song.\textsuperscript{56}

This is an intrinsic factor of the blues tradition. Consider Robert Johnson, who 'wrote' only a handful of 'original' lines, and whose style owed so much to Skip James; and yet Johnson surpassed James in his emotional intensity, his technique and his handling of common material. Johnson's brilliance lies in how he used repetition to his advantage. Although he played within the usual twelve-bar blues structure, Johnson frequently added or dropped a bar; he rarely played two verses in a song in quite the same way; he often changed tempo mid-song; and he would occasionally sing and play in different time signatures.\textsuperscript{57} By doing so, Johnson never seems constrained by the demands of the blues form, and he avoids the regularity that we associate with minor art.

Repetition is closely related to the blues' insistence on performance rather than text. As everybody knows, a traditional blues stanza consists of the same line repeated once, followed by a pay-off line:

\begin{quote}
You shouldn't mistreat me because I'm young and wild.
No, you shouldn't mistreat me, mama, because I'm young and wild.
You must always remember, baby, you was once a child.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Take into account the prevalence of stock phrases (by the time the first line has been repeated, most of the audience will have an idea what the pay-off line will be) and you have a form whose limitations place a considerable burden on the singer. The challenge, then, is to wring a nuance of difference from the repeated line; perhaps a wavering of doubt, or a more emphatic pronunciation. This could be accomplished vocally, or enhanced by the inclusion of extra sub-clauses and asides. Such changes subtly alter the meaning of the line, and leave the concluding line open to interpretation: does it refer to the first 'meaning' or the second? How much discrepancy is there between the two? The need for a fresh interpretation rejuvenates the lines and demonstrates the theatrical nature of the blues: while they purport to be the direct expression of an emotional state, they are also always a performance to be interpreted rather than a statement to be taken literally. The content of a blues line will tend to be

\textsuperscript{57} In 'Last Fair Deal Gone Down', Johnson plays guitar in 4/4, but sings a vocal in 12/8.
\textsuperscript{58} Sleepy John Estes, 'Broken-hearted, Ragged and Dirty Too', \textit{Drop Down Mama} (Orbis, 1995) These lines are used in various other songs as well.
emphatic and stark, but in performance, repetition inevitably introduces a more subtle reading, deepening the emotional possibilities of a line far beyond its apparent means. In the quoted example, Sleepy John Estes’s cracked, delicate vocal implies that the woman has no need to ‘remember’ her youth (she is young), and also that he himself is too old to use youth as an excuse.

The success of a blues line does not entirely depend on the listeners’ ability to cross-reference it: when the blues becomes so self-conscious that it requires prior knowledge, it turns into jazz. The difference lies in the performer’s relationship with the audience. A blues audience was expected to interact with the singer: many blues songs invite such participation via repeated lines, stock formulations, a call and response structure, and the practice of leaving key-words in the repeated line unspoken or replaced by a note on the guitar. By contrast, when jazz musicians employ a call and response motif, it is so that they can interact with each other; the audience is expected to appreciate the performance but not to participate in it. (I have a CD of a Charles Mingus gig where he repeatedly asks the audience to applaud but to otherwise stay silent, as the gig is being recorded: he is not being ironic.)

The place of the artist in the blues tradition was attractive to MacSweeney because it offered a resolution to the collectivist/individualist dialectic that had hindered much of his 70s work. By placing the emphasis on performance, the blues presented an arena in which the artist proved their worth by synthesising personal troubles and classic common-property blues lines. In Memos, MacSweeney attempts to use repetition as a means of replicating this experience for the reader, but lacks the requisite confidence, and ducks out of the challenge. Instead, much of Memos consists of witty, jazz-like riffing on ‘MacSweeneyesque’ tropes and images, like a jazz soloist playing for the band. Significantly, Memos is dedicated to Terry Kelly and Nicholas Johnson: friends of MacSweeney, who would recognise his pet-hates such as B&Q. Much of Memos requires prior knowledge of MacSweeney’s writings: for example, in ‘Memo 4’, MacSweeney’s address to Shelley sends us back to Flames on the Beach at Veraggio, while the reference to ‘the judge, the brehon’ in ‘Memo 16’ reminds us of the tormentor-addressee of ‘Finnbar’s Lament’.

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59 Many examples of this technique can be found in the recordings of Blind Willie Johnson and Charley Patton.
As Peter Manson has observed, much of MacSweeney’s poetry has a cumulative effect:

Tics of phrase, character and landscape recur in poems written years apart.... The result can make a small pamphlet like Hellhound Memos read much bigger than its volume – nearly every page connects with something the reader’s, with luck, met before, altering MacSweeneyworld forever in the process.60

Nevertheless, there is a considerable difference between Memos’ over-reliance on pre-existing material (reflecting MacSweeney’s anxiety over his role and ability) and the very different way Demons revisits familiar MacSweeney territory. Where Memos merely cross-references, leaving its referents unchallenged and unchanged, Demons re-casts familiar talismans in the light of a powerful new self-projection. To this end, the most important formal development in Memos is MacSweeney’s use of blues-adapted repetition as a way of cross-referencing within the sequence. This technique, discovered in Odes and explored in Memos, will be perfected in Demons. It enabled MacSweeney to replicate for the newcomer something of the cumulative recognition effect that committed readers such as Peter Manson enjoyed. I will now trace some of the cross-referencing in the opening poems of Memos.

‘Memo 1’ begins ‘Sunk in my darkness at daylight’, which immediately recalls the Dylan line ‘Darkness at the break of noon’,61 which was itself a reference to Arthur Koesler’s Darkness at Noon.62 Alerting us to the inter-Memo cross-references, ‘Memo 2’ will begin by echoing this opening line: ‘Sunk at my crossroads.’ Other recurring motifs include coupon crystal goblets, childlessness, phlegm and rain. ‘Memo 1’ repeats the word ‘sunk’ four times over its 17 lines, and the poem’s downward trajectory is enhanced by the scarcity of active verbs other than ‘sunk’. The poem then slows to a leaden crawl with these heavily repetitive lines:

My sun,
your sun. My fuck-up, your fuck-up.
My rain, your rain.63

60 Peter Manson, Object Permanence, No.1, http://www.petermanson.com/Macsweeney.htm [accessed 8.8.08]
61 Bob Dylan, ‘It’s Alright Ma (I’m Only Bleeding), Bringin’ It All Back Home (Columbia, 1965)
62 Arthur Koestler, Darkness at Noon, trans., Daphne Hardy (London: Hutchinson, 1973) [first publ. 1940]
63 [1], p.186
These lines allude to a poem by Anne Sexton⁶⁴, who will be invoked throughout the sequence. As the poem grinds to a stand-still, we are given an isolated closing line as sardonic as Dylan could have wished for: 'All aboard and welcome.' The first section sounds a deep, despairing note that acts as a bass motif for what follows. Through repetition, MacSweeney reminds us of this bleak atmosphere, often in anachronistic contexts. For example, recalling (with fondness) a lover’s tiff, MacSweeney writes 'We made a point of arguing. My shoes. Your shoes./ Your shoes. My shoes'.⁶⁵ Here, the echo of the earlier lines 'My fuck-up, your fuck-up', suggests that the bleak mood of 'Memo 1' was latent even in this seemingly innocuous episode.

'Memo 2' provides further instances of repetition throwing a new light on an image. Consider this fantasy of showmanship: ‘I’d walk in there, turn the tables, rinse/ the crowd with phlegm, make their shoes walk.’⁶⁶ That last clause echoes the Dylan blues line 'Everybody says you’re using voodoo, I seen your feet walk by themselves',⁶⁷ and the implicit rock n’ roll quality to the fantasy is brought out in the poem’s final line: ‘where’s your Elvis lipcurl now?’ However, 'Memo 14' returns to the trope of turning the tables, only to recast the rock n’ roll fantasy as a religious image: ‘I thought/ of the Jesus Christ Almighty in white lawn/ turning the tables and phlegming the fools’.⁶⁸ The expression to ‘turn the tables’ on someone derives from Christ overturning the traders’ tables in the temple. Combining both images, 'Memo 14' ends with what appears to be a motorcycle crash, which we recall when we read ‘Pasolini Demon Memo’ in Demons, for it also portrays Christ as a Hell’s Angel:

The Jesus Christ Almighty is a barely stripling bare-chested biker.
Bolting Pharisee jailers shaking shackles and chains, knuckled love and hate in Galilee blue, ace of clubs across his tanned blades.
He rides into town on a Vincent Black Shadow and moves his feet around.
My territory, his territory.⁶⁹

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⁶⁴ 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', Selected Poems of Anne Sexton, ed. Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George, (New York: Mariner Books, 2000) p.27. The poem concludes with these lines: 'my kitchen, your kitchen, my face, your face'.
⁶⁵ '[12]', Memos, p.16
⁶⁶ '[2]', p.186
⁶⁷ Bob Dylan, 'New Pony' Street Legal (Columbia, 1978)
⁶⁸ '[14]', Memos, p.18
⁶⁹ 'Pasolini Demon Memo', p.235
That last line glances back at the 'my sun/your sun' motif in Memos. The notion of Christ as a Hell's Angel is one that MacSweeney returned to in his 1996 interview with Andrew Duncan, where he speaks approvingly of Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1964 film Il Vangelo secondo Matteo, and comments that if Jesus had been alive today 'he would have been a biker, he would have been a rocker'. As Tom Paulin has noted, 'the Puritan reads the Bible in a directly personal manner', and here MacSweeney's use of repetition allows the reader to see how personal images resonate within his accretive imagination.

Andrew Duncan criticised the amount of repetition in Memos: 'MacSweeney refers three times in his poem here to “maniac milk”: it would be quicker if he just said “alcohol”'. Here, Duncan has missed an allusion to Robert Johnson's 'Malted Milk', a song about alcoholism. Duncan summarised Memos as

mainly sarcastic and satirical comment on unimportant details of daily life, some passages about drinking and unnamed distress, but also some scenes where the poet-hero gets to hang out with famous stars, rather like singing along to a record. This is the kind of appropriate, low-affect mélange we have learnt to call post-modern.

Duncan is complaining about the way MacSweeney continually invokes his musical and literary heroes throughout Memos: 'Shaking hands with Robert Johnson and the Jesus Christ Almighty', 'Anne Sexton, Robert Johnson, Barry MacSweeney at the crossroads/ Swapping riffs on an Olympia portable...' 'Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan/ Anne Sexton and Barry MacSweeney', '...at the Gallowgate crossroads/ where Robert Johnson Anne Sexton Barry MacSweeney/ hoy fury late chemist kitchen sink rota dead shrimp blues/ onto the Olympia...'. However, I believe Duncan has misinterpreted MacSweeney's intentions: the poet is not trying to convey an experience, or even establish a network of literary allusion; rather, it is the act of naming these antecedents that is important. Detail is not built up: instead, the tableau is re-enacted in various contexts. The roll call of Anne Sexton, Robert

70 Duncan/MacSweeney interview.
72 Andrew Duncan, 'Kicking shit with Arvel Watson and C. Day Lewis: Part 2 of the review of Conductors of Chaos', http://www.pinko.org/80.html [accessed 8.808] In this review, Duncan also complains about the number of 'country and western clichés' in Memos. We can assume he was not a blues fan.
73 Ibid.
74 ['11'], p.190
75 ['7'], Memos, p.11
76 ['15'], Memos, p.19
77 ['17'], Memos, p.21
Johnson and Bob Dylan sustains an aggrandising self-myth that, like equivalent gestures in blues or rap lyrics, is a reaction to society's negative perception of the individual: 'Me and the devil were walking side by side...'. If we read Memos as an insecure text, as I think we should, the roll call can also be seen as a defensive gesture of self-promotion. Like his self-reflexive cross-referencing, it betrays an anxiety over his invisibility, and suggest a wish to read and write himself into a tradition on his own terms. Duncan has observed:

The poetry fails when the appropriation of signs is too perfunctory; in Hellhound Memos, moments of the poet at the crossroads with Anne Sexton and (the blues singer) Robert Johnson, 'swapping licks' on an old typewriter, are embarrassing and unpersuasive. Duncan's choice of the word 'unpersuasive' is astute: the Memos have a willed quality, as though MacSweeney were trying to convince himself as much as the reader. When Sexton reappears in Demons, MacSweeney provides us with a more stable context: we understand the apparition to be 'real' to the speaker because these are alcohol-induced hallucinations.

Duncan is right to complain that Memos depends too heavily on a private system of symbols and does not manage to stand alone; indeed, it does not seem to want to stand alone. Memos is a fragile text that does not answer the questions it sets itself, and we must wait until Demons before we see MacSweeney make a more thoroughgoing attempt at presenting himself as a blues anti-hero, i.e. a character of whom the mythic stories of notoriety and excess can be believed. Rather than simply expressing hero-worship for Robert Johnson, in Demons MacSweeney projects aspects of himself with which the reader is invited to identify:

Today it's me with the twelve strings, the three bars, me with the solo harmonica, unaccompanied raw heart sax machine. Me with the loony frets.

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78 Robert Johnson, 'Crossroads Blues'.
79 Andrew Duncan, 'The mythical history of Northumbria; or, feathered slave to unreasonable demands: Barry MacSweeney (1948-200)', Poetry Salzburg No.1, p.135
80 'Shreds Of Mercy/The Merest Shame', p.231
Black Sun and the Poetry of Depression

Julia Kristeva's characterisation of depressive speech as repetitive and lacking in conviction could be a description of the least successful moments in Memos:

Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed – repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. 81

In Black Sun, her study of the link between depression and the compulsion to write poetry, Kristeva accepts the classic psychoanalytical premise that we mourn for a lost maternal object. In normal development, the lost mother is retrieved as sign or word, as the child embraces language. Meaning in language is arbitrary (for example, different languages use different words for 'laughter'), and language acquisition involves learning to accept the artifice that links the word to the phenomenon; however, the depressive refuses to accept this artifice, and forms a problematic relation to language. The refusal to enter the world of signs is a way of denying separation from the lost mother:

Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a negation (Verneinung) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. "I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother," is what the speaking being seems to be saying. "But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language."

Depressed persons, on the contrary, disavow the negation: they cancel it out, suspend it, and nostalgically fall back on the real object (the Thing) of their loss, which is just what they do not manage to lose, to which they remain painfully riveted. 82

Kristeva would interpret MacSweeney's establishment of a symbolic lineage ('a recourse to proper names linked to a subject's real or imaginary history, with the subject declaring itself their heir or equal') as manic form of identification; a disavowal of the negation; a 'sheathing of depression' that should not be mistaken for the healthy

82 Kristeva, p.43
83 Ibid., p.24
84 Ibid., p24
identification that enables our entry into the world of signs. Such manic identifications signify 'paternal weakness' and 'nostalgic dedication to the lost mother'. The phrase 'paternal weakness' connects MacSweeney's lineage-litanies to his tendency to choose 'weak' surrogate father figures such as Jim Morrison over Bob Dylan, or Chatterton over Shelley. In reference to Nerval's list of literary/historical antecedents in his poem 'El Desdichado', Kristeva observes:

It is not certain that those figures had for Nerval the semantic fullness of their mythological or medieval source. The litaneutical, hallucinatory gathering of their names allows one to suppose that they might merely have the value of signs, broken up and impossible to unify, of the lost Thing.

This applies equally well to MacSweeney, who repeats his litany of precursors in Memos until the names appear to become sources of value in and of themselves, rather than signifying a valuable figure, tradition or ethos. Kristeva goes on to say 'The series of names attempts to fill the space left empty by the lack of a sole name. Paternal name, or Name of God.' Thus, the litanies of Memos can be traced back to MacSweeney's initial act of changing his paternal name and, more broadly, to his obsession with father figures:

Since the One or His Name is deemed dead or negated, there looms the possibility of replacement through a series of imaginary filiations. Such mythical, esoteric, or historical families or brotherhoods or doubles that Nerval feverishly imposes in place of the One, however, seem finally to be endowed with incantatory, conspiratorial, ritual value. Instead of pointing to their concrete referent, those names indicate, rather than mean, a massive, uncircumventable, unnameable presence, as if they were the anaphora of the unique object; not the mother's "symbolic equivalence," but the shifter "this," empty of meaning.

This allows us to connect the lineage litanies in Memos to Ranter's ahistoric appropriation of radical political groups. Although the two collections differ in tone and subject, they are both self-consciously directed pieces of writing that share structural similarities.

Kristeva's theories are useful because they are not only able to account for the way depression can defeat poetry (by an emptying-out of language, as is frequently the case in Memos), but also for the way it can provoke the qualities of language that we most value in

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85 Ibid., p.24
86 Ibid., p.157
87 Ibid., p.163
88 Ibid., p.164
poetry. Here, Kristeva contrasts the minor art that can be produced by a manic form of denial (we think of the less successful poetry MacSweeney was writing in the 70s), with art that has triumphed over depression:

Aesthetic exultance, rising by means of ideal and artifice above ordinary constructions suitable to the standards of natural language and trivialized social code, can partake of this manic activity. If it remains at that level the work will stand revealed in its falsity - ersatz, imitation, or carbon copy. On the contrary, the work of art that insures the rebirth of its author and its reader or viewer is one that succeeds in integrating the artificial language it puts forward (new style, new composition, surprising imagination) and the unnamed agitations of an omnipotent self that ordinary social and linguistic usage always leave somewhat orphaned or plunged into mourning. Hence such a fiction, if it isn't an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection...

MacSweeney would surely agree with Kristeva in seeing poetry as a means of survival; indeed, as a means of enabling the rebirth of the artist. MacSweeney's artistic rebirth would take place with his next collection *Pearl*, and while *Memos* indicates above all the poet's depressive inability to express his inner trauma, the collection does contain significant developments: for example, for the first time, the pathos is centred not on the narrator but on the figure of a young girl. This girl will eventually grow into *Pearl*, MacSweeney's best creation and the one most able to stand as a 'symbolic equivalence' of everything he felt he had lost. In *Memos*, the male-aggressor/female-victim dichotomy is too polarised to answer the societal questions MacSweeney asks, and will be revised and scrutinised in *Pearl*. MacSweeney found it useful in opening an area of psychic trauma, but to fully explore this area, he required a voice at once more stable and more capacious; capable of an historical perspective and a greater delicacy: this would be the burden of *Pearl*.

*Memos* is best considered as a series of sketches that precipitate the major work, but it accomplishes a great advance in the way it integrates two of MacSweeney's familiar structural devices: the quest and the individualist/collectivist dialectic. The collection's progress from the multiplex moron to the little girl is a form of the troubadour quest for the lost object of desire; but it also resolves MacSweeney's lifelong vacillation between public, social poetry and individualist, heroic self-projection. *Memos* begins by focusing on the figure of a rampaging 'multiplex moron' in a violet shell suit:

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89 Ibid., pp.50-1
Me the multiplex moron, multigenerational multiplicity, many fingered man with a violet shell suit, stolen BMW and a rack of E. I'm here!90

Reading Memos after 'Finnbar's Lament', we are struck by the return to a more aggressive, satiric mode of writing. As Peter Barry observes:

The force often comes from the placing of broken-off sentences or fragments at the end of lines (like 'Keep it', 'That's all' and 'no God available' [...]), giving an edgy, threatening tone, with the characteristic, plangent down-note at the end which is typical of masculine utterances in aggressive mode.91

However, MacSweeney will quickly exhaust the 'masculine' Memos mask; even if you place the 'multiplex moron' in B&Q with ravening hellhounds and the Jesus Christ Almighty, the limitations of the clipped, pent-up, tight-lipped Northern male persona are obvious: this 'jackpot chancer'92 is too much a caricature and by wearing his mask MacSweeney is able to convey little beyond a certain dark glee at his antics. Peter Barry overstates the case when he writes '...MacSweeney's shoplifters become the latest in line [sic] which expresses an endemic English libertarian, egalitarian spirit'.93 In fact, MacSweeney's feelings about such figures were far more complicated. Consider the highly disparaging terms in which MacSweeney spoke of the Meadowell rioters when introducing the Memos at a reading:

...there's a whole class of people in Newcastle, in the North East, who wear a uniform and do uniform things. The men wear ear rings, have shaved heads, have tattoos, wear violet or pink or orange and black shell suits, with basketball boots, paid for by stealing videos from respectable people's houses, have pitbull terriers, unmuzzled, and unchallenged by the police on the street. The women wear black leather blousons, tight badly taken-up Levis - or not Levis but denims - no stockings and white court stilettos. And they generally have badly done blonde hair which has come out brown at the roots. And it's uncombed: they get on the bus in the morning and it's still flat.94

Litherland confirms that this really was MacSweeney's attitude:

90 '[3]', p.187
91 Peter Barry, 'Writing the Inner City', Contemporary British Poetry and the City, Manchester University Press, 2000, p.70
92 '[3]', p.187
93 Peter Barry, p.74
94 Barry MacSweeney reading.
Some people think that Barry saw [the Meadowell rioters] as some sort of anti-heroes. I don’t think he did actually. To be honest, he was quite conservative in that kind of way. He actually hated them. He saw them as a degeneration of the decent working folk that lived on his estate...\textsuperscript{95}

As he had been in \textit{Ranter}, MacSweeney is both attracted and repelled by these riotous elements.

The \textit{Memos} are an example of MacSweeney identifying with a degenerate surrogate self. In the 60s and 70s, MacSweeney identified himself positively with young-genius poets and rock stars; in \textit{Jury Vet} he wrote from a position of feeling equally attracted and repelled by commercialised sexuality; and in his late work he identifies with pariah figures: non-writers like the \textit{Memos} joy-rider, non-speakers like Pearl, disturbed killers like Mary Bell and eventually even Adolf Hitler. These identifications grow more perfunctory and less convincing as they become more extreme. By identifying himself with figures he finds abhorrent, such as the joy-rider in \textit{Memos}, MacSweeney creates a great instability in the text. In a review of \textit{Memos}, Peter Manson writes ‘the overriding image I personally take away from the sequence is that of the Hey-wait-a-minute facial expression which passes now and again between MacSweeney-the-pursued and MacSweeney-the-pursuer’.\textsuperscript{96} Here, Manson seems to be remembering \textit{Ranter}, which shares its self-driven quest structure with \textit{Memos}.

The figure of the little girl gradually comes to dominate the sequence, from around the mid-way point of ‘Memo [9]’, the shortest and most puzzling \textit{Memo}. It reads in full:

\begin{quote}
God bless you little girl the lean dry hand
wrote on her forehead as the knife went in.\textsuperscript{97}
\end{quote}

The hand is ‘dry’, so this is not a blessing with holy water (how then has anything been written on the girl’s forehead?); rather it seems to be a parody of such a blessing. There is something clinical in the ritual, which is part-baptism, part-last-rites. Presumably it is the murderer who is administering the blessing; at the very least, if there are two figures present they are complicit in each other’s actions. The poem reads like an expression of religious fundamentalist outrage at abortion. I connect the ‘little girl’ to Bonney, Vivienne Carlton’s

\textsuperscript{95} Jackie Litherland interview.
\textsuperscript{96} Peter Manson (see above).
\textsuperscript{97} ‘[9]’, p.189 This poem was written on 11.9.92
aborted child. The poem is strikingly similar to the opening couplet of a poem MacSweeney wrote twenty years earlier, 'Ode to the Unborn', which also describes abortion as an act of violence, although we may note the roles of aggressor and victim have been reversed:

her name was Bonney and though she wasn’t registered
she bored a hole through his iron idiot heart\(^{98}\)

This poem is preceded by 'Ode', which begins 'Urals postmaster, this is your/ dead child!'\(^{99}\), before swerving off into another cryptic poem. The similarity between 'Memo [9]' and 'Ode to the Unborn' reflects the enduring power of this unconscious symbol, but *Odes* can only present it as a snapshot, as though the procedural approach has enabled MacSweeney to momentarily outflank his own psychic defences. *Memos* places the little girl in a sequence that weighs the cost of past mistakes, and thus it represents an advance, and a step towards the fully realised symbol we find in *Pearl*.

As I have discussed, Bonney symbolised the road not taken: in a parallel universe, MacSweeney was a satisfied father and husband. If MacSweeney's story about the breakdown which enabled him to write the *Memos* is true, then it is surely significant that the crack-up occurred while he was visiting his brother: this was as close as he came to participating in a stable family unit. Self-reproach was bound to follow, and 'Memo [9]' is followed by several poems spoken by abused women (including 'Darlington Susan',\(^{100}\) whom MacSweeney abruptly abandoned to marry Lesley). In these poems we hear Pearl speak for the first time:

Alone without lipstick she said in the lit doorway:
I cannot speak in cogent sentences but still you will not terrify me.
I have seen all of the films and you are not worse than them.
I have been to the top of the cairn for you, northern prince,
and I died every inch of the way.
I listened to the piper and it made me sick.

Nothing will bring me back: no herbal verbals, no award-winning
regional disease, coal mines for example.
No sex with wet hair. No gin and talc.
I'll just wash and go.\(^{101}\)

\(^{98}\) 'Ode to the Unborn', p.44
\(^{99}\) 'Ode', p.43
\(^{100}\) '[12]', *Memos*, p.16
\(^{101}\) '[10]', p.189
Pearl is not named here and her image is mixed with memories of Lesley Bourne ('I'll just wash and go' is presumably a reference to the speed with which she washed MacSweeney out of her hair), but we can identify Pearl by her disdain for lipstick, which will be re-iterated in Pearl: 'Lipstick, she said, on a slate in the rain, / is a complete nobody to me.'

Memos contains most of the key players and many of the props we find in Pearl and Demons, but they remain inert. Exactly how MacSweeney brings them to life in Demons is mysterious: it is as though, without changing any of the component parts, he has reversed the energy of the earlier book. Compared to the demons, the hellhounds seem merely symptomatic of the poet's paranoia: they are unable to sustain a symbolic reading. The hellhounds can be easily warded off by invoking the holy names of Anne Sexton, Robert Johnson and Barry MacSweeney. By contrast, the demons are Anne Sexton, Robert Johnson and Barry MacSweeney, and there is no escape. Likewise, the little girl is a relatively minor element in Memos, and she comes to dominate the sequence towards its conclusion, like the Bride in earlier quest narratives such as Ranter. She represents a sanctuary from the multiplex morons. MacSweeney realises his mistake, and places her centre stage at the beginning of his next major sequence, so that we can see how his abandonment of her leads directly to his degraded life in the contemporary urban world, where he pays for his sins. Presenting Pearl and Demons together in one volume makes this trajectory especially clear.

While Memos evidences depression (both in the poems' capitulation to it, and their occasional transcending of it), it also contains the seed of acceptance, the final stage of MacSweeney's trauma adjustment, which will see him produce his best work. Memos gave MacSweeney a way to combine social commentary with the heroic, individualist poetry that provided him with his best work; he was in the process of discovering his most perfect symbol (Pearl); and the blues-influenced emphasis on performance had given him a new perspective on his lifelong anxiety over influence and collectivity.

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102 'Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground', p. 208. Note the blues reference.
Chapter Six: Victory over the Black Sunne, 1994 – 1997

Friends, fellow non-members of the black sun anarchist nada addict group: we’re in for a lousy final chapter.¹

Acceptance, the final stage in MacSweeney’s trauma adjustment, is marked in the collections *Pearl* and *Demons* by the poet’s confrontation with his most significant father figures, and by his creation of Pearl. Pearl is a richly symbolic figure, who unites several motifs that recur throughout MacSweeney’s work: the lost daughter, the abandoned lover and the absent mother. *Demons* pursues the theme of self-appraisal, being both an account of the poet’s struggle with alcoholism and a summative statement on the price of naming yourself a poet.

I continue to make use of Kristeva’s theories on depression and language acquisition in order to explore Pearl’s symbolic function, and the connections between *Pearl* and *Demons*. I also consider the collections’ treatment of politics and journalism, and offer a reading of both collections as quests for redemption that stand as the culmination of MacSweeney’s writing life. I distinguish between a quest for redemption and confessionalism, and explore the ways in which MacSweeney used a small number of autobiographical details to activate a complex system of symbols.

‘*I am Pearl*’

The depressed narcissist mourns not an Object but the Thing. Let me posit the “Thing” as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center [sic] of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated.

Of this Nerval provides a dazzling metaphor that suggests an insistence without presence, a light without representation: the Thing is an imagined sun, bright and black at the same time.²

¹ ‘Nothing Are These Times’, p.254
According to Kristeva, the poet is 'the continuous historian less of his real history than of the symbolic events that have lead [sic] his body toward significance or threatened his consciousness with foundering.\(^3\) A poem may attain the function of 'commemoration of the genesis of symbols and phantasmal life into texts that become the artist's only “true” life...\(^4\)

For this to happen, the poet's language must be of a particular quality, and Kristeva distinguishes everyday, trivial language (in which we unthinkingly utilise a system of arbitrary signs) from poetic language, which is caught up in an attempt to reach beyond the world of 'meaningless signs'. While the depressive refuses to engage with the world of signs, falling back on a nostalgic attachment to a lost Thing, the depressive poet is able to use language to transcend his/her predicament. In this way, Kristeva proposes a link between loss, depression, and the compulsion to write poems:

Ever since that archaic attachment the depressed person has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable, that perhaps only devouring might represent, or an invocation might point out, but no word could signify. With those affected by melancholia, primary identification proves to be fragile, insufficient to secure other identifications, which are symbolic this time, on the basis of which the erotic Thing might become a captivating Object of desire insuring continuity in a metonymy of pleasure. The melancholy Thing interrupts desiring metonymy, just as it prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach the place I have referred to? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole “container” seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing.\(^5\)

*Pearl*, an account of the poet's childhood love for a mute illiterate girl, is MacSweeney's most successful attempt to use poetic form to convey his lost Thing. As I will show, Pearl's significance extends far beyond any actual relationship MacSweeney once had, encompassing his own depression, his sense of political defeat, and societal upheavals (especially in the north of England). Above all, Pearl is a symbol of a great, inexpressible loss: literally inexpressible since much of their relationship was pre-linguistic. We note that while MacSweeney teaches Pearl to write, the girl shows no sign of progress in the poems; instead, her eloquent internal monologues continue to contrast sharply with her inability to

\(^3\) Kristeva, pp.165-6  
\(^4\) Ibid.  
\(^5\) Ibid., pp.13-14
speak or write. This is because Pearl is a symbol of the frozen state trauma MacSweeney had carried inside him since 1968.

According to Kristeva, separation from the maternal object initiates the depressive phase. In healthy development, a process of negation allows the infant to retrieve the lost object through the acquisition of language. Without this vital negation, the child may ‘take refuge in a passive position, in fact a schizo-paranoid one, dominated by projective identification – the refusal to speak that underlies a number of language retardations is in fact an assertion of omnipotence and thus of primary ascendancy over the object’. Pearl emerges from exactly this depressive condition: a frozen, liminal space in which both children have been separated from their mothers, but remain at an even greater distance from their absent fathers. Pearl’s mother is referred to frequently but never actually appears; her father is only mentioned once; and MacSweeney’s parents are not mentioned at all. Rebecca Smith notes that the motif of the absent fathers is encoded in the children’s westward gazes:

Pearl’s westward gaze is later explicated as resulting from familial concerns (‘dad/long gone to Cumberland’) with half-allusion to MacSweeney’s own peripheral – although in this sequence continually portentous – consciousness of his own paternal Irish heritage: ‘Donegal sleet spoke to our faces uniquely’.

The west is one of the sequence’s most frequently invoked motifs. It is there in the title of the opening poem, ‘Looking Down From The West Window’, which expresses a wish for loving acceptance from a father-figure. The speaker might be Pearl or MacSweeney:

I smashed my wings
against the rain-soaked deck
and was happy you lifted me
into your safe fingers and palms.
If not too disgusted, hold me
close forever keenly.

The absent father never appears, and Pearl continues to speak, in Kristeva’s terms, a purely semiotic language: her only utterance is ‘a-a-a-a-a-a’, a kinetic rhythm that is incapable of figurative or conceptual function, having stalled at the beginning of the alphabet.

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6 Ibid., p.63
7 Rebecca A Smith, Barry MacSweeney’s North East: A Study of the Rural and the Urban in his Published and Unpublished Poetry, p.53
8 ‘Looking Down From The West Window’, p.195
When siblings have absent or neglectful parents, they will usually take on something of the parental role for each other. Like a good Kristevan father, MacSweeney gives Pearl language and, in later poems such as those collected in *Pearl in the Silver Morning*, Pearl is often described in maternal terms, watching over the poet and offering advice and encouragement:

Pearl in her moonshawl
in the sky gazing down at me – saying,
stay cool just like the frost on the lawns.
You'll melt in time.
Your broken heart will be warmed again.
Just look at the upcoming sunne.
Anger is hot, and Bar you have too much of it.9

Here, Pearl is depicted as a kindly moon, and since *Pearl in the Silver Morning* follows *Demons*, the reader will know to counterpoint this moon/Pearl with the black sun of alcoholism. Pearl's maternal aspect represents a progression: this is the first sustained depiction of a mother figure in MacSweeney's oeuvre; prior to this, the mother's place had been taken by the second father. Pearl's maternal aspect is related to her redemptive capacity, and I will consider the significance of this in greater detail later in this chapter.

As will already be obvious, *Pearl* has a dual time frame, in which events that took place forty years in the past intermingle with the present day. Not only is MacSweeney's present-day work as a journalist haunted by his memories of Pearl, but Pearl is also haunted by her proleptic vision of what the future holds for Allendale and England. In her denunciation of Tories, Pearl frequently sounds like a distinctly MacSweeneyesque political prophet: 'The cold-blooded couriers of planned unemployment/ were not then in full station...’10 The reader is left in no doubt that the past is the more vital realm for the poet, and Kristeva describes this kind of depressive nostalgia:

Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience, melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days, I am nailed down to them, no

9 'Pearl In The Silver Morning', p.323
10 'From The Land Of Tumblestones', p.207
revolution is possible, there is no future... A dweller in truncated time, the depressed person is necessarily a dweller in the imaginary realm.\textsuperscript{11}

A dweller in the imaginary realm he may be, but when MacSweeney notes that Sparty Lea's beautiful landscapes offer 'bijou conversion possibilities/ for the turbo-mob, weird souls dreaming of car-reg// numbers and mobile phone codes',\textsuperscript{12} he introduces a self-reflexive awareness of his own temptation to construct a nostalgic fantasy. MacSweeney needs to ensure that the sequence is not taken as his poetic 'second home': he may well have felt defensive about this, since his childhood experience of Allendale was only possible because his grandparents – and later his aunt and his mother – owned holiday homes in the area. To this end, MacSweeney avoids sentimentalising Allendale by depicting the unpleasant aspects of Pearl's rural life (poverty, provincial prejudice, long hours, hard work, etc) in a straightforward manner, while wrapping his most nostalgic moments in the image of lost industry: 'her/ Woolworth butterfly blue plastic clip, still made in Britain/ then...'.\textsuperscript{13}

MacSweeney's nostalgia for lost industry leads him to apply industrial terms and metaphors to pastoral imagery, and even to Pearl herself, with her 'poorly engineered tongue'.\textsuperscript{14} At one point, MacSweeney compares, extraordinarily, the heat of the children's love to 'the Consett Steelworks/ ovens before the Pharisees shut them down'.\textsuperscript{15} The loss of rural industry that is lamented in Pearl will initially be offset by 'new jobs with the power station',\textsuperscript{16} but will ultimately lead to the 'roaring bypass... the sieged estate...'.\textsuperscript{17} This is the terrain of Memos, and we remember that the 'multiplex moron' of that sequence only exists because there is no work for him to do. As MacSweeney observed when introducing Memos at a poetry reading: 'The North East... used to have a reputation for building ships, giving the world electricity, giving the world coal – ha! – heavy engineering, etcetera, there isn't any of that now. It gives the world joy riders and ram raiders.'\textsuperscript{18} Of course, MacSweeney's nostalgia is enabled by his never having worked in heavy industry, and should be understood

\textsuperscript{11} Kristeva, p.60-1
\textsuperscript{12} 'Cushy Number', p.320
\textsuperscript{13} 'Fever', p.203
\textsuperscript{14} 'Woe, Woe, Woe', p.211
\textsuperscript{15} 'Pearl In The Silver Morning', p.323. Here, the 'Pharisees' are Tories: religious and political references combine as forces that surround the children but go largely unremarked because they were not questioned at the time.
\textsuperscript{16} 'From The Land Of Tumblestones', p.207
\textsuperscript{17} 'No Such Thing', p.199. The 'sieged estate' refers to the Meadowell riots that inspired Memos.
\textsuperscript{18} Barry MacSweeney reading his poems

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as an expression of his dented pride at the erosion of the North's industrial basis. On this basis, certain objects (such as the Woolworth butterfly clip) are to be valued because they signify industrial pride or carry personal resonance, whereas others ('my crystal coupon goblet') are to be rejected as mere commodities that demonstrate the hollow core of our society. The division is subjective and arbitrary, but it contributes to our understanding of Pearl's imaginative realm as being filled with totemic objects and talismans.

The many socio-political references scattered throughout Pearl indicate the way, in conveying the loss of Pearl, MacSweeney has also lost the mute part of himself: he is finally able to speak after six years of depressive silence, and Pearl's paradoxical in/articulacy is a symbolic enactment of the poet's experience of having been rendered speechless by personal and political despair. This paradox - feeling compelled to rant having been reduced to inarticulate rage - means that many of Pearl's declarations of muteness are curiously verbose: 'I do not emit articulate sound', she says, with something like pride, and in the assertion 'I am Pearl' (which is repeated in the first three poems and with variations throughout the sequence) we detect Pearl's satisfaction in finally being able to declare herself a subject, as well as her ability to outflank the poet's attempts at containing her. We also hear MacSweeney telling us something so directly we are liable to miss it: he is Pearl. As Jackie Litherland observes:

[MacSweeney]'s under her skin, he's the person suffering. Of course there was a person with that affliction, but he's taken it on himself. [...] The lost idyll is also about his lost life, not just Pearl's. ...anyone who knows an alcoholic knows they carry this inside them: they're always aware of the fact that they're not fulfilling their potential as husbands or as lovers or as would-be fathers or as journalists or as poets.

From Ranter onwards, MacSweeney's poems frequently depict the poet confronting, or being confronted by, his accusers. Pearl represents a great development of this theme: instead of lamenting the lost daughter as he had in Memos, he becomes her. This identification makes a vast emotional terrain available to the poet. As a symbol of his aborted daughter, Pearl can be seen as MacSweeney's principle accuser; but their relationship is

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19 In 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', MacSweeney writes 'This place, Tom, was a nation, making trains and ships and cranes...' p.284
20 '[1]', p.186
21 'Sweet Jesus: Pearl's Prayer', p.196
22 Jackie Litherland interview.
nurturing and forgiving. MacSweeney avoids his habitual binary of anger and lament, and his depiction of this lost childhood love achieves great complexity and maturity. Identification with Pearl also prepares the ground for *Demons*, in which alcoholism makes MacSweeney a social pariah, just as Pearl was overlooked in her village because of her supposed idiocy. When we encounter the disregard MacSweeney’s alcoholism provokes (‘a discerning passer-by: leave him he’s pissed’), we remember Pearl’s ‘mute appeal’ and her rage at being ignored or given sideways looks. In *Demons*, MacSweeney makes his connection to Pearl explicit:

Here in the clouds is her eloquent silence
before addiction overwhelmed me and
made me silent myself.

With *Pearl*, MacSweeney finds an interim solution to the crisis in confidence that had dogged him for many years. We can trace MacSweeney’s fluctuating confidence and see how it influences his poetry by comparing the antepenultimate and penultimate poems in the sequence: ‘Pearl’s Poem Of Joy And Treasure’ (hereafter ‘Joy’) and ‘Pearl At 4 a.m.’. These two poems bear many structural similarities, and deploy motifs familiar from elsewhere in the sequence, but to varying degrees of success. ‘Joy’ was written immediately after MacSweeney’s Colpitts reading on 14.11.93. Litherland explains:

I asked him to read at Colpitts and by the time he did that he’d already written quite a few [Pearl poems], maybe half a dozen. He said – I’m not sure if it’s true – but he said that the reception of his Pearl poems at Colpitts encouraged him to write more. …everybody was just knocked out by them.

MacSweeney sent a draft of ‘Joy’ to Litherland, with a note saying that it was ‘written last November after the Durham reading. Thank you for bringing me back to life...’ The poem finds MacSweeney trying to tune in to the *Pearl* signal again by opening with some of Pearl’s characteristically overloaded music: ‘Spout, pout, spout. Put my spittle all about’. The allusion to the hokey-cokey is an infelicity too far and should have been cut. The poem ends with a crass appeal for love:

23 ‘Up A Height And Raining’, p.276
24 ‘Pearl Alone’, p.205
25 ‘Up A Height And Raining’, p.278
26 Jackie Litherland interview.
27 Letter from Barry Macsweeney to Jackie Litherland in Litherland’s possession.
28 ‘Pearl’s Poem Of Joy And Treasure’, p.214
Let the argent stars shine upon my upturned smiling face
and furnish me with hope.
I need all the love I can hold.29

If the buried allusion to Bob Dylan in the penultimate line (‘and furnish me with tape’30) strikes us as discordant, that last line is altogether too close to Whitney Houston.

By contrast, ‘Pearl at 4 a.m.’ is one of MacSweeney’s most perfect poems. The opening lines again deploy overloaded music, but this time to sublime effect: ‘Moon afloat, drunken opal shuggy boat/ in an ocean of planets and stars.’31 The poem also ends with Pearl professing her love, but in more understated and imaginatively charged language:

...for I am in love
with something I do not know.
It is the brusque wind,
the nearest falling tumblestones
dislodged by the spate, the finest
snowdrops under heaven.32

‘Pearl at 4 a.m.’ contains many familiar motifs, such as spittle or ‘Snow once more/ in my broken face, reduced/ to licking the swollen door post’, but it is the poem’s restraint that makes it so much more successful than other, similar pieces. The repetition is underplayed to good effect: ‘Gone, gone, click of quarter irons.’ If restraint can be taken as a sign of confidence in this sequence, the point at which the poem was written is significant: ‘Pearl at 4 a.m.’ was written on 22.2.94 and MacSweeney sent a copy to Litherland with a note saying ‘Here is the final (I wonder) page of PEARL, ready at 4 a.m.’33 As usual, MacSweeney was at his best towards the end of the sequence, having built up the language and vocabulary in the preceding poems.

Pearl’s voice is necessarily synthetic: from its conception it was mixed with MacSweeney’s and in these poems neither character can speak without the other. In ‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’ the speaker switches four times between MacSweeney and Pearl,

\[\text{29 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{30 Bob Dylan, ‘Stuck Inside of Mobile with Memphis Blues Again’, Blonde on Blonde (Columbia, 1966)}\]
\[\text{31 ‘Pearl At 4 a.m.’, p.215}\]
\[\text{32 Ibid.}\]
\[\text{33 Draft of ‘Pearl at 4 a.m.’ in Jackie Litherland’s possession. In fact, MacSweeney would add one more poem to the sequence.}\]
though none of these changes are indicated. The effect is akin to a radio signal breaking up and another voice cutting in, or the garbled initial stages of a séance. MacSweeney foregrounds the fact that this is a worked-up, literary appeal by opening with various equivalents to the Old English *Hwaet*:

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Listen, hark, attend; wait a moment
as they used to say
in the ancient tongue of literacy, before
language was poisoned to a wreckage, which
you will find for a fee (going up)
in your earpiece, inside
the wainscoted foyer
of the Museum of Stupidity down in the dumps:
Permit me to say this on grey roofs slate, as I protect
my poor writing, I can’t do joined up, with soaked forearm
from the driving rain – I am Pearl.34
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This opening sentence is extended over eleven lines, with many sub-clauses. Presumably all Pearl intended was to say her name, but she digresses into predictions, literary history and circumstantial details. All of these apparently random associations relate to how and why Pearl has been denied a voice. Able to speak at last, Pearl draws energy by switching and swooping between registers and generic roles, for example from realist-pastoral to allegorical political hectoring. More subtle switches occur between the categories of memory (we are asked to accept these poems as reconstructions of an idyllic childhood) and fantasy (the reunion takes place in poetry: the only way this lost, innocent love can be redeemed). In switching between high and low registers and between formal and colloquial idioms, MacSweeney/Pearl flexes his/her newfound linguistic muscles: to switch registers is to assert linguistic authority (the boss decides when it’s ok for the office to share a joke, and when it’s time to get back to work).

The absence of narrative progression in *Pearl* is an extension of these fruitful inconsistencies. Rather than a linear narrative, MacSweeney offers a series of tableaux, accompanied by a steady reiteration of known facts with the occasional addition of a new factoid: a microcosm of MacSweeney’s circling, accretive career arc. For example, ‘Woe, Woe, Woe’ ends with the line ‘smiling quietly only for you’.35 Pearl’s smile is a new detail,

34 ‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’, p.196
35 ‘Woe, Woe, Woe’, p.211

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but much of the rest of the poem consists of familiar motifs such as beast clarts, rain, the drizzle licked from the doorpost and the plan to tax Pearl’s ABC. The effect is similar to a series of musical variations being played, each one introducing a few new motifs. This tableaux structure is sometimes present within individual poems. ‘Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground’ opens with a dictionary-like definition:

Pearl: beautiful lustre, highly prized gem,
    precious one, finest example of its kind,
    dewdrop, tear of Mary, reduced by attrition
to small-rounded grains.\textsuperscript{36}

Then abandons syntax and offers Pearl in a series of snapshots:

Pearl in the Borage up to her waist. 
Pearl in the wildmint. 
Pearl in the wind-spilled water. 
Pearl flecked in the sunlight, one foot here, one there, knuckles on hips on the stile, all angles and charms. 
Pearl adrift in the rain... \textsuperscript{37}

MacSweeney’s refusal to construct a linear narrative is connected to Pearl’s inability to form grammatical (hierarchical) sentences. Pearl is always beyond the poet’s ability to describe her, and MacSweeney rejuvenates this familiar trope through a characteristic combination of powerful image, syntactic slippage and a depiction of language as a force in the world:

When you sink

towards the head of the hush, where the beck runs out of the tunnel towards the west, brewing foam as it goes, we’ll meet my adverbs ad infinitum: tongue-stoned invisible prelate of the shaking holes.\textsuperscript{38}

At this point, it might appear that Pearl’s voice and persona are hopelessly inconsistent: she is somehow mute and yet articulate; illiterate and yet able to make literary allusion; lost in the past and yet looking back from the present-day; a victim of bad government and yet a prophetic political commentator. But throughout his career,

\textsuperscript{36} ‘Dark Was The Night And Cold Was The Ground’, p.208
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} ‘Cushy Number’, p.320
MacSweeney found inconsistency — swerving away from his readers' or his own expectations — to be a sure sign that he was on the right path; as Litherland observes of the failed poem 'No Mercy': 'It was following a formula that was trying to agree too much with itself. It was conforming to its own ideas in a very directed way and it didn't work.' Much of Pearl's success can be traced to the degree to which the poems convince us they have escaped MacSweeney's control and are asserting themselves simply as poems — a trait of many of MacSweeney's most successful creations.

Silenced, humiliated and rejected, Pearl is a symbol of MacSweeney's position in 1968: she is the dispossessed young poet, the silenced voice driven underground. We can now see the moment of trauma as the necessary grit from which Pearl would, over a period of many years, form. Pearl speaks with MacSweeney's ur-voice: the unified, struggled-for voice that is able to speak with absolute authority on suffering, language, society and politics. To hear her is to hear the voice of MacSweeney's muse, and she is his finest achievement.

The Quest for Redemption in Pearl

Pearl is often depicted up to her knees in marigolds, heifer muck, water, mint or borage, as though she were sinking into the landscape, or the past, or her grave, and waiting for MacSweeney to pluck her out. But Pearl also symbolises salvation: in existing outside of language, Pearl is not bound by any narrative and is therefore not at the mercy of time; thus, she offers a means by which the poet may redeem his wasted life. Pearl both offers and requires redemption, and when Pearl/MacSweeney says 'I could never speak. What good was I to anyone?'39 we sense the redemptive identification that these poems pursue. In this section, I will consider the poetic, religious and journalistic dimensions of this redemption. I will then explore the reasons why MacSweeney's declaration of solidarity with the victim in Pearl gives way to the alienated vision of Demons.

39 'Those Sandmartin Tails', p.210
Most obviously, Pearl needs to be saved from silence. MacSweeney accomplishes this through his poetry, conveying Pearl's inarticulacy through repetition and by reducing words to phonemes, as though the language were constantly threatening to break up into pre-linguistic jabberwocky: 'Woe, Woe, Woe', 'a-a-a-a-a-a-a', 'O', 'ABC', 'cry, cry, cry', 'A and E and I and U and O' and 'Spout, pout, spout'. Pearl records MacSweeney's attempt to rescue poetry from such abject language, and some of the most startling musical effects occur at the point where a phonetic or rhythmical impulse all but overpowers the meaning of a line, for example 'in the snow my croaking throat soaked'. Such effects become a hallmark of both Pearl and the subsequent Demons poems, where they are deployed with even more daring: 'I am the bloastoot, floating/ volevoter at the collapse pollstation'. We come to associate Pearl so strongly with 'nonsense' and repetition that when we read similar lines in MacSweeney's earlier work, they appear to presage Pearl's coming, for example these lines from Memos: 'The rest is trash./ Babble, babble, babble. Slick, stink, stink', or

Pink, pink, pink, you said, as I thought of the Jesus Christ Almighty in white lawn turning the tables and phlegming the fools.

The phlegm with which the Memos are drenched will turn to spittle in Pearl, and be related to Pearl's fissured mouth: a symbol of angry dissent becomes a symbol of redemption.

Kristeva draws a link between the lost maternal Thing and all that is rejected and despised: 'the Thing is the recipient that contains my dejecta and everything that results from cadere [Latin: to fall] – it is a waste which, in my sadness, I merge. It is Job's ashpit in the Bible.' Likewise, because Pearl's silence renders her worthless in the eyes of her community ('So low a nobody I am beneath the cowslip's/ shadow'), her nonsense

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40 'Woe, Woe, Woe', p.211
41 'Pearl Alone', p.205
42 'Blizzard: So Much Bad Fortune', p.212
43 'Lost Pearl', p.213
44 Ibid., p.213
45 'Pearl's Poem Of Joy And Treasure', p.214
46 'Blizzard: So Much Bad Fortune', p.212
47 'Nothing Are These Times', p.253
48 ['4']', p.188
49 ['[14]', Memos, p.18
50 Kristeva, p.15
51 'Pearl Says', p.198
language is repeatedly linked to the abject: cow shit, slurry, saliva, idiocy and so on. These earthy details help to offset the more sentimental moments, but the abject elements do not simply authorise MacSweeney's more rhapsodic flights of fancy: they are accepted, repeated, celebrated, until they too become sources of wonder. Poetry is able to transform that which is conventionally despised and rejected into something valuable. For example, MacSweeney likens Pearl's cleft palate to a seam of jewels in a mine, linking her disability to the vanished mining industry of the Allendale region where the children met:

The congenital fissure in the roof of her mouth
laid down with priceless gems, beaten lustrous copper
and barely hidden seams of gold.\(^{52}\)

Nature is similarly described as brimming with riches only available to the innocent children:
'the trout's opal seed-sac bubbling with jewels'\(^{53}\) and 'O the rare gold/ under the tips of the trees.'\(^{54}\) This simple childhood love is MacSweeney's reward for accepting Pearl.

Redemption also needs to be understood in terms of MacSweeney's Protestant heritage. As I discussed in Chapter Three, MacSweeney's attempt to give a voice to the silenced of history in *Black Torch*, an attempt at redemption which drew on Socialist/historicist notions, did not succeed. 'No Mercy', a poem with similar ambitions, also failed. This has clearly influenced MacSweeney's narrower, individualist focus in *Pearl*. In giving Pearl a voice and saving her from the prejudice of her community, MacSweeney brings about a (very small) social improvement. This is typical of the Protestant social reformer who refuses to be subordinated to any system, even his own, and is content to save/convert society one individual at a time. His court of appeal is not the efficacy of a social or political system, but his own conscience; thus, social improvement is intimately related to personal salvation. In *Demons*, this impulse will be given fuller expression in the Tom poems, in which MacSweeney identifies with early Protestant dissenters such as Bunyan and Milton.

The many religious references in *Pearl* do not appear contrived because they are simply presented as circumstantial details. Going to church and listening to Pastor Cook’s

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\(^{52}\) 'No Buses To Damascus', p.201  
\(^{53}\) 'We Are Not Stones', p.325  
\(^{54}\) 'From The Land Of Tumblestones', p.207
hellfire sermons was a routine part of the children’s life: ‘Our unregenerated soil-heap hilsides, bleak/ and bare of plastic life: one everyday religion.’

Hence, there are many religious-sounding titles that do not reflect explicitly religious material in the poems, such as ‘No Buses to Damascus’, or ‘Cavalry at Calvary’, or ‘Sweet Jesus: Pearl’s Prayer’. These imply a religious context that never quite comes into focus. ‘We Are Not Stones’ describes Sparty Lea as ‘our mysterious heaven’ in pastoral-religious terms:

The water was anointment water,  
a cool upland baptism. You, you  
were Delilah and Mary-of-the-tears,  
of the unspoiled lips lapping rushing whitewater.

Finally, MacSweeney’s attempt to redeem Pearl is closely tied to his work as a journalist. Litherland says that MacSweeney saw himself in his capacity as a journalist as a ‘dashing white knight’, armed with a pen, fighting injustice wherever he found it. In an abrupt departure from the tone of the rest of the Pearl sequence, MacSweeney describes his day-job in ‘Cavalry At Calvary’, beginning with lines reminiscent of Jury Vet:

All aboard, it’s party time, with  
my averring slut receptionist.  
In the land of panty punishment  
she’s king.

In this poem, traces of human fellow-feeling for victims in Sarajevo compete with professional cynicism (‘page one if there’s nowt better, pet’) and some knowingly delusional boasts that the poet-journalist has saved the life of a bomb-victim baby (Irma Hadzimuratovic) by virtue of his accurate reporting ‘for the world wide page of the Shields Gazette’. The title ‘Cavalry At Calvary’ alludes to both Lancelot and Christ, suggesting MacSweeney’s journalistic saviour complex, and striking a worrisome note for the reader who remembers Lancelot’s centrality to the abortion-trauma image cluster.

55 ‘Cushy Number’, p.320  
56 ‘We Are Not Stones’, p.325  
57 Jackie Litherland interview.  
58 ‘Cavalry At Calvary’, p.206  
59 Ibid.  
60 Ibid.
Ever since Lancelot made his appearance in ‘The Last Bud’, where he was first associated with the abortion, imagery of knights on horseback became a regular feature of MacSweeney’s poetry. For example, in ‘Wolf Tongue: a Chatterton ode’, the speaker follows Hotspur in a flight from domesticity: ‘let me taste my horse across vast Northumberland/ like a thunderbolt of blood’.

In Jury Vet, MacSweeney interjects lines from Perle, mixing sexual violence and child abuse:

BREVE ME BRYGHTE clean green pearl. Breve
brine supercharging urchin spunkette
dribblings into. […]

YOU
floor dragged, roughened
by violence, banged
tits & tots.

In these lines, feelings of sexual guilt are soon accompanied by the image of a horse: a few lines later we read ‘Bring me my long-staffed pony’, ‘pony’ being a slang term for penis. Throughout Demons MacSweeney uses Lancelot imagery to convey sexual failings. Here he conflates the now-demonic knight’s lance with the moon’s damaged throat (we think of Pearl’s damaged mouth and the poet’s long silence):

Tonight in the troubletorn heartland where heroes die and play,
in the knightly arenas of vainglory, demons’ candle dancing
and lancing of the moon’s throat will see us down
betrayed by feverfaith in love.

For much of Demons, the speaker bemoans his horselessness; a reference to diminished virility brought on by alcohol abuse: ‘I am but a fake prince, no horse, I stride all tall alone’ and ‘I am alone with the pack on the frozen bypass without a wincing jade’.

The more menacing aspect of the Lancelot/saviour complex remains latent in ‘Cavalry At Calvary’, but emerges clearly in the last poem in the sequence, ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’. Jackie Litherland explains that this poem developed through three distinct stages:

61 ‘Wolf Tongue: a Chatterton ode’, p.71
62 ‘STREETERS INTO RED’, pp.115-6
63 ‘Angel Showing Lead Shot Damage’, p.230
64 ‘Himself Bright Starre Northern Within’, p.261
65 Ibid.
...the first version of this was very small, and it was written with dashes, long dashes at the beginning of each line, and it was very telegrammatic, a bit like notes to yourself. Maybe a dozen lines, with these dashes at the beginning, like Emily Dickinson dashes, jumps in ideas and half sentences.\textsuperscript{66}

When Litherland suggested that it looked like notes for a poem rather than the poem itself, MacSweeney expanded it. However, this second version was equally unusual, being more than twice as long as any other Pearl poem. Unable or unwilling to edit the poem, MacSweeney asked Litherland to tick the lines she liked and cross out any truly terrible lines:

...when I next saw it he’d taken out every line I didn’t like, and that was the poem. I was horrified, because I thought that’s too close to me editing his work, and I don’t want to do that.\textsuperscript{67}

This brutal process of revision explains why the published version reads like a collection of motifs and images that have not quite gelled, requiring many exclamations and dashes to cover syntactical elisions. This contrasts sharply with the measured, stately progress of the preceding poem (‘Pearl at 4 a.m.’) and the sequence as a whole:

Where is my fierce-eyed word warrior today? Slap with violence all you wish night and day, my language Lancelot – left hand margin Olympia 5022813 – ABC impossible – and I struggle and struggle but mean to win my way in (cat, sat, bat, mat!): only the peewit, the puffed lark – look at him rise ardent-breasted as the tractor comes by – and chough with poetry in the grass-turning, wind-burning morning. Say nowt.\textsuperscript{68}

The poem maintains this unfocused activity throughout. This is the poem in which MacSweeney loses the Pearl signal and picks up on the Demon signal.

The title of ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’, which is the only line present in all three versions, indicates an abrupt about-turn: having striven so hard to create a voice for Pearl, this will be her final say-so. From its opening line, ‘Fusillade of the sun’s eye-piercing darts’, the poem has the more threatening atmosphere we associate with Demons rather than Pearl. For the

\textsuperscript{66} Jackie Litherland interview.\textsuperscript{67} Jackie Litherland interview.\textsuperscript{68} ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’, p.216
first time, the young MacSweeney is an aggressive figure, a ‘fierce-eyed word warrior’ who ‘slap[s] with violence’. The verb ‘slap’ is not given an object because after MacSweeney describes himself as a ‘language Lancelot’ the sentence fragments, retreating defensively into familiar motifs (we recognise the Olympia typewriter from Memos, we have heard Pearl say ‘ABC impossible’ before, and so on). MacSweeney then describes Pearl in her inarticulate pastoral idyll for fifteen lines, before abruptly returning to the Lancelot image, obsessing over the phallic needle/blade associations of the name:

Lance, lance, Lancelot, let me practice that, index fingers working the keys, corporal acting as sergeant: yes, leave your argent blade inside my aching brain, its light will help me find the way towards the proper letters of my ABC...69

Lancelot is again associated with a typewriter, in an ironic reference to the journalist-poet’s chivalric attempt to save Pearl from her inarticulacy. The saviour complex has degenerated into a need to prove or ensure the woman’s fallen, pitiful state in order to necessitate a ‘saviour’, and Pearl’s repeated appeals for tenderness (‘please don’t crush my heart’70 and ‘If not too disgusted, hold me/ close’71 etc) suggest she has been mistreated. When Pearl appears in Demons, she is once again in danger: ‘haul me/ from the terrible terror of the wristblood wire.’72 The exact nature of the peril remains unstated, but MacSweeney’s name is related to the wire: ‘Bar, Bar, barbed wire. Bar, the barbs...’73 The wire is suddenly associated with concentration camps and Pearl is described as ‘Blonde but a Jewess just the same’,74 linking her with Jackie Litherland. MacSweeney frequently berates himself for unpleasant things he has said (‘my scoffing tongue/ whose flinting/ drove her away’75) and a major theme in Demons is the alcoholic’s terror of his own anger. The reader may suspect that the only thing Pearl needs saving from is MacSweeney himself: from his construction of her as mute, and from his hurtful words. ‘Pearl’s Final Say-So’ records MacSweeney’s failed attempt to present this insight in a Pearl poem, and it explains why Pearl led to the Demons as surely as Songs of Innocence led to Songs of Experience.

69 Ibid.
70 ‘Pearl Alone’, p.205
71 ‘Looking Down From The West Window’, p.195
72 ‘Pearl Against The Barbed Wire’, p.252
73 Ibid, p.250
74 Ibid. p.251
75 ‘Finbar’s Lament’, p.179
Pearl is a quest for personal redemption. The three aspects of redemption are linked to parenting: language acquisition, moral instruction, and the offering of protection. This leads MacSweeney to combine the quest structure with the Lancelot image complex in 'Pearl's Final Say-So': a pivotal poem not simply within Pearl, but within MacSweeney's life. However, MacSweeney was still suffering from an intermittent lack of confidence: drafts of 'Pearl at 4 a.m.' and 'Pearl's Poem Of Joy And Treasure' (in the private archives of Terry Kelly and Jackie Litherland respectively) show that much of Pearl was written according to MacSweeney's usual method of adding lines; but when 'Pearl's Final Say-So' displayed signs of a new, darker inspiration, he withdrew and handed control over to an editor (Litherland).

Bunting, Wordsworth, Perle and Pearl

The allusions to Bob Dylan in Memos represented a seed of confidence that was lacking in much of the rest of that collection. In Pearl, MacSweeney galvanises himself for another attempt to square up to his principal father-figure, Basil Bunting. In its geographical location (an isolated rural hamlet) and its emotional territory, Pearl shares much with the first part of Briggflatts. Both Bunting and MacSweeney revisited their childhoods, and the first loves they abandoned (Peggy and Pearl), late in their careers, as part of a larger project of self-assessment following a period in which they came to feel they had fallen silent as poets and failed as men. During the fallow years, both poets returned to the North East and worked for several years on small local newspapers in a state of self-imposed exile from the literary scene. Furthermore, the locations both poets chose for their late works (Brigflatts and Allendale) were not their places of birth, but places where they enjoyed holidays as children: it follows that while their observations are founded on solid observation (the intense, wondering observation that bright children bring to bear on a new environment), they are likelier to sentimentalise, or at least see the positive aspects, than would a native.

MacSweeney's engagement with Bunting in Pearl is more profound than it had been in Black Torch or Ranter: attempted camaraderie in the former, and heavily signposted allusions in the latter, formed a distracting surface dazzle that indicated nothing so much as MacSweeney's insecurity over how those poems would be received. This is not to dismiss
the poems out of hand: although only partially successful in themselves, they provided MacSweeney with the symbols, localities and antecedents that, when augmented by passionately felt personal experience in *Pearl*, enabled his best work. As an example of how the poet has absorbed Bunting's lessons, we can compare *Ranter*'s more opportunistic assemblage of Northumbrian antecedents, with MacSweeney's more skilful, contrapuntal use of Wordsworth and the Perle poet in *Pearl*.

Jeffrey Wainwright has noted how Wordsworth's faith in common, 'unpoetic' diction is frequently felt in Part One of *Briggflatts*. The poet who described farms 'green to the very door' or 'the round ocean and the living air / And the blue sky', is clearly present in lines such as 'The moon sits on the fell / but it will rain'. Bunting noted approvingly of Wordsworth 'He could make the simplest words carry the most complex emotions', and *Briggflatts* contrasts a Wordsworthian faith in simple, un-poetic diction, with more convoluted northern literary idioms. Consider these lines from 'Part One' to *Briggflatts*:

> Her parents in bed  
> the children dry their clothes.  
> He has untied the tape  
> of her striped flannel drawers  
> before the range. Naked  
> on the pricked rag mat  
> his fingers comb  
> thatch of his manhood's home.

Commenting on these lines, Michael Schmidt writes: 'Bunting's rhetoric gets the better of him and he produces banal effects. [...] The unfortunate rhyme and conceit, the academic poise, are totally out of keeping with the poem.' According to Schmidt, Bunting intrudes on the erotic scene with an 'unfortunate' rhyme that flouts decorum. Elsewhere, Schmidt condemns these lines as 'near-doggerel'. But the rhyming couplets with which Bunting

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77 William Wordsworth, 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798', *Lyrical Ballads*, p.113
78 Ibid. p.116
81 *Briggflatts*, p.63
ends each stanza work in a similar manner to the intricately rhymed 'bob and wheel' that completes each stanza of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Bunting's decision to close every stanza in Part One with a rhyming flourish signifies his insistence that these childhood scenes, however brilliantly evoked, no longer exist independently: they require reconstruction and mediation. To Schmidt's ear, the rhyme 'comb/home' is inadmissible because it is enabled by a circumlocution ('thatch of his manhood's home' for 'pubic hair'), but in matching the unmissable rhyme with what Donald Davie rightly calls a 'kenning' (an Old English device long out of favour), Bunting signals his commitment to a tradition quite different from Schmidt's. Rather than privilege a rhetoric of self-effacement in which the author remains as tactfully quiet as possible, Bunting looked back to a much older tradition in which the ingenuity of the craftsman's invention was to be praised. On these terms the privacy of the scene (Bunting tells us that the girl's parents are in bed, just as Pearl's mother is always conveniently absent) and the skilfulness of the poet's reconstruction strengthen one another.

MacSweeney's intention is similarly forked. Throughout Pearl tender moments are frequently described in laboured language with many qualifications, as though the emotion was so delicate that it was constrained by entering the language. For example, Pearl describes herself laughing 'as best I could laugh, though you never thought it ugly./ Indeed the word you used was the word beautiful... ' This is a language that draws attention to itself, as well it might: the extent to which we are defined by our command of language is a major theme of Pearl. Pearl will not succeed if we do not believe in Pearl's actuality; however it would be bad faith to speak of a Pearl who exists free of MacSweeney's mediation. MacSweeney must have it both ways, lulling us with idyllic details only to pull the ground from under us. All poets know that a deliberately clumsy line can be used to lower the reader's guard, making a sudden exact, well-judged line more powerful. One of MacSweeney's signature moves is to alternate highfalutin Romanticism ('Is not the peewit's high-up heather song all poetry to me?') with down-to-earth details that salt the sentimentality: 'crisps/ and ox-cheek for tea' and 'spam on Sundays/ and chips if there is...
coal'. The food imagery suggests the influence of *Briggflatts*, in which the children enjoy simple rustic fare:

Sour rye porridge from the hob with cream and black tea, meat, crust and crumb.

Schmidt might find such details 'banal', but a commitment to detail, and to distinctly Northern experience, to 'things' as Bunting would say, is another essential part of Bunting and MacSweeney's projects in *Briggflatts* and *Pearl*.

*Pearl* also contrasts Wordsworthian simplicity with Old English kenning. Consider these lines from 'No Such Thing':

Grassblade glintstreak in one of the last mornings before I come to meet you, Pearl, as the rain shies.

Here the Old English kenning 'grassblade glintstreak' sounds reminiscent of *Perle*, the medieval poem that likewise combines emotional directness with highly ornate language and design. *Perle* had provided MacSweeney with a key point of reference throughout his career, but it is especially pertinent to *Pearl* as it is narrated by a man whose daughter died in infancy, and we remember that Pearl is, among other things, the daughter MacSweeney never had. In the quoted passage, the kenning is immediately followed by a simple, emotionally direct line. Writing of these lines, Peter Riley has observed:

The break into plain language at 'before I come to meet you' is surely the brightest and most heartening, even redemptive, act in these three lines, a linguistic act which quite transcends the forlorn messages of the text...

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88 'Pearl Alone', p.205
89 *Briggflatts*, p.63
90 Bunting would connect his practice here to his love of Wordsworth: 'I should have said about Wordsworth that occasionally his stress on "thing" is remarkable. Any competent writer must know the importance of things'. Bunting, quoted in Jonathan Williams, 'An Interview with Basil Bunting', *Conjunctions*, 5 (1983), p.86
91 'No Such Thing', p.199
92 The earliest published reference is in 'Beak Ode' from 1972.
93 Peter Riley, unpublished essay.
In case 'grassblade glintstreak' is not enough to send the reader back to Perle, MacSweeney soon gives us a line in which nearly every word alliterates: 'Deep despair destroys and dents delight.' Here, the bruising alliteration is again used to authorise a more subtle emotional appeal in the following line: 'now that I have pledged my future to you, Pearl.'

'No Such Thing' is immediately followed by 'Mony Ryal Ray', which takes its title and its epigraph ('For urthely hertr might not suffyse') directly from Perle. 'Mony Ryal Ray' begins 'Skybrightness drove me/ to the cool of the lake', which is a loose translation of the following lines from Perle:

I sey byyonde that myry mere
A crystal clyffe ful relusaunt;
Mony ryal ray con fro hit rere.

The poem ends with a more subtle example of Perle's influence; the perfect line 'Only the magnificent peewit more eloquent than Pearl', in which internal rhyme (magnificent/eloquent) is matched with alliteration: peewit/Pearl. 'Mony Ryal Ray' is followed by 'No Buses to Damascus', and it too references Perle, opening with lines that steadily increase the alliteration:

Wonder Pearl distemper pale, queen
of Blanchland who rode mare Bonny
by stooks and stiles in the land
of waving wings and borage blue
and striving storms of stalks and stems.

Here, the four-stress alliterated line becomes increasingly pronounced, until once again every stress is alliterated, and sense begins to give way to the musical demand: a typical MacSweeney moment. I would guess that these three poems, presented consecutively near the beginning of the sequence, were also written consecutively, at a time when MacSweeney's head was ringing with the cadences of Perle.

94 'No Such Thing', p.199
96 'Mony Ryal Ray', p.200
97 *Perle*, l. 158-160, p.7
98 'No Buses To Damascus', p. 201
The Perle poem is, among other things, an astonishing display of formal virtuosity: the poem is densely alliterative, intricately rhymed, and each stanza ends with a refrain. MacSweeney alludes to the form of Perle, but he does not - could not - adhere to it. His relation to the form of the anterior poem is analogous to his relation to antecedents: he tends to name them, rather than weave allusions into his text. In this sense, Perle is another of MacSweeney's false trails, albeit a more subtle and complex false trail than, say, the Old English references in Ranter. After referencing Perle so markedly in this trio of poems, MacSweeney knows that the occasional use of alliteration, and the name of Pearl, will be enough to alert the reader to possible parallels. MacSweeney leaves the degree of influence an unknown quantity so that whenever we read the name 'Pearl' (as we so often do) it is charged with the possibility of a connection to the anterior text. As with the pop heroes that MacSweeney namedrops, there is little close textual engagement: rather, the act of naming is the important factor. Perle's relation to Pearl is similar to Robert Johnson's relation to Memos: in both cases, MacSweeney alludes to the formal demands of the original, but swerves away from the close connection implied by the title.

The references to Perle are designed to obscure the more profound influence of Bunting. This accounts for the way MacSweeney always likens himself in his dashing-white-knight mode to Lancelot rather than Gawain, when Gawain would seem to be the likelier candidate since his story appears in the Perle manuscript and was the work of the same poet. Gawain's story is structured around a bizarre, seemingly impossible wager: a green knight appears and says that any knight may cut off his head so long as the blow is returned a year later. Gawain, the youngest knight in Arthur's company, takes up the challenge and cuts off the green knight's head. The bulk of the poem then concerns Gawain being tempted by a beautiful woman, which has its precedent in Lancelot being tempted by Guinevere (Gawain's story is in fact a variation on an earlier tale about Lancelot). Chivalry, reciprocity, retribution and youthful impetuosity: it is perverse of MacSweeney not to refer directly to Gawain - but this is another way in which MacSweeney asserts a distinction between himself and Bunting. Bunting had already welcomed Sir Gawain and the Green Knight into the Northumbrian stable, comparing its use of allegory to that of The Lindisfarne Gospels.99 In the 1970s, embarking on a revisionist history of the north, Bunting 'discovered' that the Green knight's tale is actually set in a part of Westmorland he visited with Peggy. These

99 See Peter Makin, p.231
associations influenced MacSweeney’s decision to avoid mention of Gawain: instead, *Perle* is privileged, a text about which Bunting appears to have said nothing. We have returned to the Bloomian duel that opened in ‘The Last Bud’; however if the competitive edge to MacSweeney’s relationship with Bunting has not disappeared, it has been transcended. Bunting’s influence is neither avoided nor denied, but absorbed; his techniques are not parodied but developed; his northern antecedents are matched with equivalents that have more resonance to MacSweeney.

‘Forgive me for my almost unforgivable delay’: *The Book of Demons* (1997)

By 1995, MacSweeney had returned home: he lived in Denton Burn, a few streets away from his mother and only a bus ride away from Allendale (where *Pearl* is set); he had recently renewed his enthusiasm for Russian revolutionary art (which Norman Gedling had introduced him to) by visiting a Kazimir Malevich exhibition in Amsterdam with Jeremy Prynne; and in the early 90s, he started to intermittently attend a John Knox Presbyterian Church with his mother (just as he had listened to Pastor Cook’s sermons in Allendale with his mother). It was a time of tumult. Having embarked on a relationship with Jackie Litherland, MacSweeney had been trying to stop drinking without seeking medical support. This led to violent mood swings, fits, black-outs and other physiological and behavioural disorders. His life fell into periods of sobriety and drinking, and after an unexplained three-day absence from the *Shields Gazette* in April, MacSweeney was sacked. He arranged to receive treatment for alcoholism at Farm Place in Surrey, and was given an estimate of £2,618 for two weeks of treatment in July. MacSweeney went on to receive various forms of treatment at several detox clinics. He seems to have been writing with a feverish intensity at this time, and he maintained an astonishing work-rate until his death in 2000.

*Demons*, like all of MacSweeney’s best work, has great presence and immediacy: the reader is carried along on an improvisatory rush of consciousness-in-process; no time to gloss or explicate, the poet surfs away on speedy associations and nimble digressions, flights of fancy and overstatement. Perhaps speed is the key: as a journalist, he was used to seeing his words published on the day that they were written; and as a poet, he published much of his poetry with small presses that had a quick turnaround. MacSweeney was prolific and would
often self-publish, or even photocopy poems, posting them out to friends. Just as his best poetry has an alert responsiveness, MacSweeney saw speedy publication as a crucial part of the writing process. His impatience with publishers is legendary: he only published *Cabaret* with Hutchinson because Fulcrum (who had made him an earlier offer) were taking too long;\(^{100}\) he famously fell out with Jeremy Prynne after Prynne lost the manuscript of *Pearl*, delaying publication for several months; and he interpreted Bloodaxe's slower turnaround time as a sign of their lack of interest. He started to look for an alternative publisher, and after several confrontations with Neil Astley, even hassled Bloodaxe's printers, demanding to know when his book would appear.

*Demons* is driven by a Protestant, libertarian, questing spirit that can be seen at work in the language of the poems. In "Towards a Poetics of Pleasure",\(^{101}\) Matthew Jarvis interprets the number of neologisms in *Demons* as a sign of a postmodern pleasure principle. To Jarvis, neologisms demonstrate 'the availability of signs for material experimentation in an environment which stresses the joys of semiotic materiality'.\(^{102}\) But when Jarvis says 'For MacSweeney, then, it seems to be the case that established signs exist *to have things done to them*',\(^{103}\) we are reminded of MacSweeney's evangelical Protestant heritage, rather than postmodern play. In *Demons*, the world exists in order to be transformed and redeemed by the poet's vision and language, and MacSweeney displays a missionary zeal in converting many of the North's defining landmarks and traditions into poetry; from the Viking landings ('I was a sacked village myself')\(^{104}\) to the shipyards ('This place, Tom, was a nation, making trains and ships and cranes');\(^{105}\) and here, in the astonishing climax to 'Sweeno, Sweeno', is that other northern birthright, football:

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Ten years in the same team Going Nowhere Albion sponsored
not just match days Cellar 5, Victoria Wine, Threshers, Red

Wine Rovers, Plonk Park Disunited, The Old Dysfunctionals,
Soused Spartans, Inter Chianti's chanting demons' unflagging
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\(^{100}\) See *Poetry Information*, p.24, where MacSweeney says 'Fulcrum offered me a book before Hutchinsons [sic], but they took so bloody long about it - they took in fact 2 years to decide about it. I mean I was only 16 then; I thought, I'm sick of bloody hanging about, I'll take the first offer that arrives, and Hutchinsons happened to be the people'.


\(^{102}\) Ibid., p.244

\(^{103}\) Ibid., p.245

\(^{104}\) 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots', p.283

\(^{105}\) 'John Bunyan to Johnny Rotten', p.284
fandom: Sweeno, Sweeno, give him a bottle he scores a goal. Own goals mostly, catalogue of lost memory matches & scores.

Hands on knees and puffing hard I’ve had enough of this. Ankle-tapping, broken bones, demonic shirt-pulling, the beautiful game on the emerald field of dreams now turf churned, filthy, white line I shimmy down impossible to see.


MacSweeney’s imagination is in full flight, and there is nothing here of the desk-bound ambition that marred his early work. Instead, we see an inspired indolence: MacSweeney seems able to take whatever material is at hand and transmute it into something rich and strange, prolonging the performance until the doubters are silenced. There are no guarantees of success but, as in a theatrical performance, an improvisatory flourish can suddenly draw magic from what were dusty props and recycled costumes a moment before.

While MacSweeney pays particular attention to the degraded signifiers of Northern identity, Demons never reads like a dutiful checklist. We see a more whimsical form of his appropriative appetite when MacSweeney takes up lines and motifs from Country music (his newfound love): ‘Get out the shotgun put it in the gunrack’107 is adapted from a line of Bonnie Raitt’s ‘Papa Come Quick’108 and ‘I am leader of the beguiled and fear of straps across my chest’109 alludes to Steve Earle’s ‘Ellis Unit One’110 (the ‘Dead man walking theme tune’111 that will later provide MacSweeney with the title of ‘When The Lights Went Out A Cheer Rose In The Air’). Johnny Cash is referenced in several poems: ‘Number 13 tattooed on his neck’,112 ‘Beast caged behind frail and fragile bars’,113 ‘Stripes on your shoulders, stripes on your back & on your hands’,114 ‘Cry, cry, cry’115 and (inevitably) ‘walk

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106 ‘Sweeno, Sweeno’, p.273-4
107 Free Pet With Every Cage’, p.220
109 ‘Buying Christmas Wrapping Paper On January 12’ p.222
110 Steve Earle, ‘Ellis Unit One’, Sidelines (Artemis, 2002)
111 ‘Angel Showing Lead Shot Damage’, p.230
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 ‘Strap Down In Snowville’, p. 268
the line'. These references to Country music, like the poet's enthusiasm for Kazimir Malevich, are idiosyncratic enough to ensure that the poet's alchemical ability to make poetry out of the most unpromising material has nothing programmatic about it.

Readers may demur at some of MacSweeney's flights of fancy. In an otherwise positive review of Demons in Northern Review, Sean O'Brien admonished the sentimentality in the opening poem of the sequence, O'Brien quotes the lines 'the pure transmission of kissing you, when/ solar winds seethe in amber wonder'. This, declares O'Brien, 'won't do at all'. However, while removing such infelicitous moments would undoubtedly improve individual poems, it would detract from the overall scope and character of the book. In this opening poem, MacSweeney needs to set up the opposite poles of alcoholism and love for Jackie Litherland; and to establish what will be a regular motif in Demons: the North's industrial heritage as an image of sexual potency (who else would do this?):

The truly great span of the legs above the city, spread and wide, rodded north and south and electrified by power passing through beneath the novas and planets and stares. Magnetised!

The grandiosity of the poet's self-projections ensure that his work is easily distinguished from art that relies for its effect on extraneous autobiographical detail; art that is 'confessional'. To make an obvious distinction, confessionalism is a term taken from Catholic tradition, whereas MacSweeney's self-righteousness and self-regard derive from some of the less attractive characteristics of Puritan culture. These characteristics resulted from the rejection of rituals such as confession: the church cannot absolve us of our sins; each individual must stand alone. Instead of a small-scale, private reckoning that appeals for acceptance and forgiveness, MacSweeney gives us grand self-projections. For example, the city in which MacSweeney is trapped becomes an extended metaphor for his repetitive, self-imprisoning behaviour. In contrast to the joyous freedom experienced in Pearl's rural setting, the setting for Demons is decidedly urban, and centres on unpleasant, functional areas of city life, such as public toilets and gutters. As Matthew Jarvis has noted "the location of

115 'Lost Pearl', p.213
116 'Sweeno, Sweeno', p.272
117 'Ode To Beauty Strength And Joy And In Memory Of The Demons', p.219
118 Sean O'Brien, 'Book of Demons: Barry MacSweeney, Bloodaxe. £7.95' in Northern Review No.27 (December 1997 – January 98) p.10
119 Ibid.
suffering... is envisaged in terms of the built environment'; 120 but more than this, what has been built is a disaster, and MacSweeney is lost on 'Earthquake Street... Richter Scale Prospekt', 121 in 'Nixville' 122 or 'Snowville'. 123 These natural disasters are an outrageous projection of the poet's sense of guilt, for the city is a paysage intérieur, and many of the invented place-names conflate disordered mental states, or physical ailments, with actual place-names: 'Do-lalley Drive... Cirrhosis Street/ and Wrecked Head Road' 124 or even the 'Department Store of Sighs'. 125 The poet is trapped within his own construction, and this relates to his wish to 'cast out' his earlier selves and styles: he wishes to escape from himself.

In his late poems, MacSweeney takes up a small number of autobiographical details such as the idyllic pastoral world of Pearl, or the childhood abuse and subsequent alcoholism depicted in Demons (each of which has its attendant mythology: the poet as child prodigy, the poète maudit, etc), in order to activate a much more complex symbolic structure. As in Briggflatts (which Bunting described as 'an autobiography, but not a record of fact' 126), we watch as autobiographical material is sculpted into patterns and enriched with profound ambiguities. The resulting symbolic structure is personal to the poet only in the sense that Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are personal to him: only that individual (at that moment, with those materials, with those aesthetic priorities) could have produced that particular work of art. I will now explore how MacSweeney uses autobiographical detail by considering one of the earliest of the Demons poems, 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me'.

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121 'Demons Swarm Upon Our Man And Tell The World He's Lost', p.244
122 'Demons In My Pocket', p.240
123 'Strap Down in Snowville', p.266
124 'Buying Christmas Wrapping Paper On January 12', p.222
125 'Strap Down In Snowville', p.268
126 Basil Bunting, Complete Poems, p.226
On the Dangers of Finding One's Voice: 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me'

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva accepts Freud's premise that our mourning for a lost maternal object conceals our aggression towards it. Hating as well as loving the lost object imbeds it within the self, to prevent it being lost again. Identification is the essential mechanism for this:

For my identification with the loved-hated other, through incorporation-introjection-projection, leads me to imbed in myself its sublime component, which becomes my necessary, tyrannical judge, as well as its subject component, which demeans me and of which I desire to rid myself. Consequently, the analysis of depression involves bringing to the fore the realization [sic] that the complaint against myself is a hatred for the other, which is without doubt the substratum of an unsuspected sexual desire.\(^{127}\)

The depressive identifies not only with the lost Thing's beneficial features but with its maleficent aspect as well: "This presents us with the first state of the self's doubling, which initiates a series of contradictory identifications that the work of the imagination will attempt to reconcile - tyrannical judge and victim, unreachable ideal or sick person beyond recovery, and so forth."\(^{128}\)

As we have seen, MacSweeney's poetry progressed via binaries, and this is why the angelic Pearl leads inevitably to the appearance of the demons. The Kristevan binaries in MacSweeney's earlier work include: the puritan/pervert sadomasochistic speaker of *Jury Vet*; the hero/villain of 'Wild Knitting'; the warlord Finnbar and his Brehon judge; and the pursuer/pursued speaker in *Memos*. MacSweeney makes no secret of the way he switches between tenderness and abuse in his role as husband and (imagined) father: 'I wreck the cot & cuddle corner in my head, burn the children, / AGAIN.'\(^{129}\) We can trace these binaries back to the initial trauma that centred on an abortion: a conflicted wish to both settle down and raise a family, and escape from such constraints. In the late poem 'I Looked Down On A Child Today' a 'bairnbarren' MacSweeney says 'I looked down on a child today, never having had one of my own...'\(^{130}\) The child in question has been killed in a road accident.

\(^{127}\) Kristeva, p.11

\(^{128}\) Ibid., pp.166-67

\(^{129}\) 'Wild Knitting', p.134

\(^{130}\) 'I Looked Down On A Child Today', p. 314
fact that the child's gender is not specified invites us to see him/her as the poet's unborn child. The most sentimental aspect of this associative cluster can be found in 'Letters to Dewey', a sequence of fifty prose poems that was occasioned by a brief telephone conversation with his friend's young son. Some of these dispense a garbled sort of paternal advice, from MacSweeney in preacher mode ("There are also strange winds, singular instruments, disgusting adornments, but you will see the truth of these at last and will be free, rinsed of sinne"), while others expose the poet's needy, conflicted feelings in a way that is painful to read:

She should not have had our daughter aborted. It was her decision only.
Her name was Bonny.

The mostly unpublished Mary Bell Sonnets demonstrate the violent flipside of this sentimentality. These poems also fail because they force the poet to deal too directly with the themes of child-abuse, guilt, injustice and self-reproach.

Kristeva would cite these binaries as evidence of MacSweeney's identification with the lost object: a fundamental step in the establishment of the depressive condition. In Pearl and Demons, a Kristevan binary asserts itself in the motif of the wounded or wounding mouth. Pearl's mouth is 'fissured' and her voice must be nurtured, coaxed and protected; when she speaks, she savours words and delights in them ('defiant' is singled out for particular praise). In Demons we encounter Pearl's hellish counterpart; a demon with a mouth full of blades:

This demon, this gem-hard
hearted agent of my worst nightmare, this MC with spuriously
disguised gesture, this orchestrator of ultimate hatred,
the man with no eyes, no cranium, no brow no hair.
He will always be known as the Demon with the Mouth of Rustling
Knives, and the meshing and unmeshing blades
are right in your face.

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131 Barry MacSweeney, Sweet Advocate (Cambridge: Equipage, 1999)
132 Ibid. Pages unnumbered.
133 Ibid.
134 'Pearl Against The Barbed Wire', p.249
135 'Ode To Beauty Strength And Joy And In Memory Of The Demons', p.218
This demon has no facial features except a monstrous, destructive mouth: symbolic of the alcoholic’s fear of their own anger, and their capacity to hurt loved ones. It is also a nightmarish rendering of the concept of a poet’s ‘voice’: an idea made flesh and living a life of its own.

According to Kristeva, another, paternal form of identification is required if these damaging binaries are to be resolved. As with any classic psychoanalytical theory of development, Kristeva presents the infant moving away from a state of symbiotic, pre-linguistic union with the mother, toward the father. This development is accomplished through language acquisition and the process of identification. Here, Kristeva describes the manner in which the child uses objects/vocalisations as the symbolic equivalents of its maternal lack, using them to enter the world of signs, symbols and art through identification with the father:

...what makes such a triumph over sadness possible is the ability of the self to identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party – father, form, schema. [...] such an identification, which may be called phallic or symbolic, insures the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation. The supporting father of such a symbolic triumph is not the oedipal father but truly that “imaginary father,” “father in pre-history” according to Freud, who guarantees primary identification. 136

Kristeva believes this paternal identification is what brings language to life; without it we are left with the depressive’s repetitive and monotonous language. If we take Pearl and Demons as complementary sequences, we can trace this same progression from a maternal, watery, pre-linguistic past to the confrontation with the father in a contemporary wasteland. These sequences form a symbolic history of MacSweeney’s accession to poet-hood.

‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’ obsessively returns to the moment in MacSweeney’s childhood when his father’s abusive behaviour combined with language acquisition and the first glimmer of the poetic vocation:

I write poetry at the age of seven and daddy wants to murder me. He does a good imitation of it: beats me with a leather belt and tears my little book in strips. 137

136 Kristeva, p.23
137 ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, p.225
‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’ posits linguistic self-consciousness as both the source of trauma and its possible resolution. After the opening eight lines, which describe abuse while maintaining the guileless tone of a child’s account of what they did on their summer holidays, the poet suddenly addresses his father directly: ‘I deliver it to you in this poem’. As in Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’, to which MacSweeney self-consciously alludes, the underlying compulsion is the need to establish a connection with the father, if only to draw him into a verbal conflict. When MacSweeney declares his love for the rain that sweeps in incessantly from Ireland, we understand it as a symbol of his frustrated love for his father.

What ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’ actually says is simply this: ‘I went to the Durham Family Practitioner Committee, and they told me one day I would drive to a housing estate near Strabane, walk to a bungalow and press the doorbell. A seven year old boy would let me in and I would ask him quietly ‘Is your daddy home?’ In other words, the abused will become the abuser; the cycle of violence will perpetuate itself. However, these words are spread across 250 lines, and the final meaning is repeatedly deferred by the inclusion of ever more stanza-long sub-clauses, creating the effect of a long-nurtured fantasy that has been refined and revisited many times. As in ‘The Last Bud’, MacSweeney alternates an almost camp theatricality (‘Daddy, do you want me to stop using the word daddy/ and not write like Sylvia Plath at all?’) with a disarmingly plainspoken candour: ‘You were never a father and you were never a friend’.

With his history of both giving and receiving verbal abuse, the poet links his father with the dictionary: ‘Daddy, when the word failure fled into my dictionary/ one page after facetious, I thought of you’, and ‘Words were my war weapon, no matter how much/ you loved Dickens’; and best of all ‘Daddy, you personally placed the sin in syntax’. According to ‘Daddy wants To Murder Me’, MacSweeney first understood language as a weapon: one that was necessary for survival. While MacSweeney is not exactly grateful, he acknowledges that his tempestuous relationship with his father is responsible for the quick-

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138 Ibid., p.226
139 See p.25, where MacSweeney writes, rather defensively, ‘And I love the rain, daddy, but you were never part of it’. Jackie Litherland has written about MacSweeney’s real-life love of rain, calling him ‘rain adorer’ in ‘Naming’, The Work of the Wind (Hexham: Flambard, 2006) p.27
140 ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, p.225
141 Ibid., p.227
142 Ibid., p.225
143 Ibid., p.225
144 Ibid., p.226
fire, opportunistic responsiveness of his language: essential qualities for his work as a journalist and poet.

The dictionary-daddy connection becomes more problematic when the poet claims to have a dictionary instead of a heart, suggesting his highly ambivalent attitude towards the new-found fluency of his writing. Some of the knee-jerk associations we find in 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me' may cause the reader to share MacSweeney's unease. For example, the boy who answers the door in the final stanza is seven years old, the same age the speaker is in the opening lines. The number seven triggers an automated response: 'Just like the deadly sins'. Here, the speaker is giving us what we have come to expect; a contract exists between performer and audience and we must collude if we are to enjoy the show. To make an accusation of opportunism would break the spell, since this performance is closer to the kind of improvisation-within-a-set-form that we find in the Robert Johnson's blues.

MacSweeney's 'autobiographical' writing is always a self-conscious performance, never more so than in 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me', which is structured around the hypnotic repetition of a well-rehearsed fantasy. Repetition is Janus-faced: enacting in language what the empirical self has already suffered offers both a means of establishing control over a traumatic incident, and a danger of becoming defined by it. To repeat is to perform, and to perform is to act deliberately. Performance offers us the opportunity to break free of our construction as victims (the performed-upon); by contrast, compulsive repetition lacks the self-awareness that characterises true performance. Freud proposes that traumatic events petrify part of the personality, dooming the sufferer to repeat the trauma:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of the conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past. These reproductions, which emerge with such unwished-for exactitude, always have as their subject some portion of infantile sexual life – of the Oedipus complex, that is, and its derivatives...

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145 Ibid., p.229
A Freudian critic would see the amount of repetition in 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me' as symptomatic of MacSweeney's failure to 'remember' the Oedipal nature of his fear of fathers. While MacSweeney is able to confront his father figures in Demons, he holds back from confronting his mother figures. The effect is rather like 'The End', the apocalyptic song that closes The Doors' first album. MacSweeney excitedly recounts the climax of this song in his 1974 interview with Eric Mottram:

Morrison in one of his longest things, "The End", his answer — because he acted like a Black Christ, he was always being shot on stage — was to take a mask from the ancient gallery, and he walks on down the hall, walks up to his sisters and brothers and says, hello. He goes up to his father's room and he says, Father, and the father says Yes, son, and he says I want to kill you. He goes up to his mother's room and he says, Mother, and his mother says yes and he says I want to — and then he gives this incredible peristaltic primal scream.147

Mottram is clearly embarrassed by MacSweeney's enthusiasm for Morrison's posturing and criticises the song's 'rather corny Freudian Oedipalism';148 but MacSweeney defends it as 'a ritual killing of his parents, to free himself of whatever he thought connected him to them'. Of course, Morrison's record label could not allow him to scream 'Mother, I want to fuck you', so they replaced the expletive with a scream. MacSweeney displays a similar squeamishness in Demons: the mother remains unrepresentable and unacknowledged.

MacSweeney's unwillingness, or inability, to represent his mother in his poetry is astonishing, since he was especially dependent on her at this point in his life: she lived just a few streets away, looked after him during his various periods of convalescence, and often cooked his meals. When MacSweeney died in May 2000, it was his mother who found his body. The absence of the mother is felt in Demons as a missing piece in a symbolic system, and we can only speculate as to whether MacSweeney would have been able to confront this subject had he lived longer: in the three years he had left after the publication of Demons, he wrote hundreds of poems, most of which found him identifying with female characters, whether to celebrate them (as he does the various female characters in Horses in Boiling Blood) or to defend them (as in Blood Money: The Marvellous Secret sonnets of Mary Bell, Child Killer). I tentatively suggest that the motif of the two fathers, the most consistently

147 Poetry Information, p.35
148 Ibid., p.35
deployed device in MacSweeney's oeuvre, was in fact a means of filling the absence of the mother that the poet would not or could not represent.

The Quest for Redemption in *The Book of Demons*

*Demons* is MacSweeney's most thoroughgoing use of the quest structure to date. The sequence begins with MacSweeney at his lowest ebb, about to submit to the demons' demand that he return to drink and kill himself:

He will always be known as the Demon with the Mouth of Rustling Knives, and the meshing and unmeshing blades are right in your face. The blades say: there are your bags. Pack them and come with us. Bring your bottles and leave her. The contract is: you drink, we don't.  

Soon after this, in 'Daddy Wants To Murder Me', we are given a historical context for the poet's alcoholism – but the poem ends with a deeply nihilistic fantasy of travelling to Ireland in order to kill his father. The rest of the sequence follows the poet's slow crawl back to humanity from this antisocial extremity, with various relapses along the way, building to the four poems MacSweeney published as *Zero Hero*: 150 'Strap Down In Snowville', 'Sweeno, Sweeno', 'Up A Height And Raining' and 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots'. These four poems strike a fine balance between libertarian linguistic excess and judicious revision.

The title of *The Book of Demons* alerts us to the collection's interest in Biblical notions of redemption. The Gospel According to St Mark151 tells of a man possessed by an unclean spirit. The man's name is not given, and when Jesus asks the demon's name he is

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149 'Ode To Beauty Strength And Joy And In Memory Of The Demons', p.218
151 Mark, V, i-xx
told 'My name is Legion, for we are many'.\(^{152}\) Evidently, demons do not displace one another: a demoniac may collect countless numbers, and we think of MacSweeney greedily absorbing influences throughout his career. In the Bible, Jesus cast out the man's demons into a herd of swine, and MacSweeney intends us to recall this passage, for he tells us he has been 'brought by demons from the piggery where my heart lay in ruins'.\(^{153}\) Redemption takes two forms in Demons: MacSweeney redeems himself as a poet by speaking with his own voice, something that requires him to 'cast out' his previous literary influences; and he redeems himself as a man by giving up his dependency on alcohol (with the help of loved ones) and by helping fellow sufferers such as Tom.

MacSweeney's earlier work had been driven by his literary precursors: he wrote to please, offend, outflank, dismiss, or declare solidarity with them; and his work can smack of a performance designed for a specific audience at a specific time. At its worst, this gives rise to a feeling of walking into a room having just missed a joke. As MacSweeney gains in confidence and status, he begins to see his once-idealised precursors as demons and tormentors. His Hall of Fame has turned into a babbling gallery of masks, and 'recovery' of the self will require him to cast out his antecedents, along with the demon of alcohol — as when Sexton et al visit MacSweeney when he is in a detox clinic. This is a sign of MacSweeney's confidence: having taken on his primary literary father-figure (Bunting) in Pearl, MacSweeney is able to confront his other literary antecedents, as well as his real life father, in Demons.

Demons marks a crucial difference in the poet's relationship to his antecedents: while many of the names are familiar from Memos (Anne Sexton, Robert Johnson, Bob Dylan and the Jesus Christ Almighty are all here), the poet now appears on an equal footing with his kindred spirits:

Tom, last night Milton & Cromwell said I should speak to you.
Bunyan smuggled a note on ragged paper.
Five knocks on the water pipe, I knew it was coming.\(^{154}\)

\(^{152}\) Ibid., V, ix
\(^{153}\) 'John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten', p.289
\(^{154}\) Ibid., p.285
Demons supplements MacSweeney's hall of fame with Russian and English revolutionary figures from Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Mayakovsky to John Bunyan and Johnny Rotten. They are depicted as fellow patients in the detox hospital, where they are as lost and degraded as the poet himself. They too have failed to change their nations through their vision, and their work has led to their being persecuted.

While Andrew Duncan found the self-aggrandising lineage-litanies in Memos 'embarrassing', in Demons MacSweeney invokes them in order to dramatise his fallen state. Of course, there are more humbling forms of self-abasement than comparing yourself to John Milton:

...I know I am not Cromwell or Milton
but I am a Protestant heretic,
a Leveller lunatic, filled and felled by wine,
whose failed allotment is a museum of weeds,
whose rainy medallions are mare's tail and crowsfoot trefoil.155

Characteristically, the depressive meaning of the text is redeemed by the confidence of the writing, and the speaker's humility is belied by the poem's literary flourishes. The sound-patterning is highly sophisticated: consider the way 'filled' becomes 'felled' and leads inevitably to 'failed', before being picked up with hope of renewal in 'trefoil'; consider the phonetic echoes of those m, l and t sounds in 'Cromwell and Milton' and 'failed allotment' and 'rainy medallions'.

There is confidence, too, in MacSweeney's handling of the garden as a metaphor for the speaker's soul, and of political England. There are many precedents for this metaphor, and in light of his recent, if short-lived, return to the Presbyterian Church, MacSweeney may well be remembering the parable in Matthew 13 of the sower and the seed; but the poem directs us to the context of the English Revolution. Significant uses of the garden metaphor in Commonwealth literature include Milton's Garden of Eden, John Bunyan's garden in the House of the Interpreter in Pilgrim's Progress, and Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden'. In the latter, Marvell celebrates his 'wondrous life', likening it to intoxicating liquor: 'The luscious

155 'Up A Height And Raining', p.276
clusters of the vine/ Upon my mouth do crush their wine'. Marvell then describes consciousness in profoundly ambiguous terms of refuge and entrapment:

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find,
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas,
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.

Marvell’s garden is a place into which a man might withdraw from, but not escape, England’s political turmoil: we think of Royalists exiled to their country estates during the Commonwealth, and the Protestant landowners who were similarly exiled during the Restoration. MacSweeney makes the metaphor his own by his characteristic specificity (‘mare’s tail’ is a nice touch, glancing at the horse imagery that is so prevalent in Demons). MacSweeney’s ‘failed allotment’ is an ambiguous image, for even as he depicts himself as fallen and abject, we see that he now holds his literary precursors as subjects: they no longer direct his poetry.

In addition to casting out his literary antecedents, MacSweeney also casts out his own earlier incarnations, either dismissing them or modifying them to suit his new purposes. As we have seen, MacSweeney frequently presents new work as the culmination of his career; but this time the reader may be inclined to agree. MacSweeney weaves his earlier voices together in a way that can (often unfairly) make his earlier poetry look like apprentice work. Briggflatts has a similar effect on Bunting’s earlier work. Some of the sentimental moments in Demons verge on the Liverpool pastiche of Cabaret: ‘There is something about just touching/ which is touching’. The declaration ‘Now it is time to put aside and forget/ the decadent period of fast red cars...’ sends us back to Boulevard’s ‘On the Apology Owed to Tom Pickard’. The faux-medieval spelling (‘Starre’ etc) reminds us of Brother Wolf’s Chatterton. A key line from Odes is recycled, with the addition of a confession of alcoholism: ‘I died/ every day since I gave up poetry/ and swapped it for a lake from the chateaux of

157 Ibid., p.101
158 ‘Your Love Is A Swarm And An Unbeguiled Swanne’, p.265
159 ‘Hooray Demons Salute The Forever Lost Parliament Of Barry And Jacqueline’, p.246
France'. There are echoes of *Jury Vet* ('Honeyfix thighbone lustmoan'), and 'Wild Knitting' is alluded to here: 'Yes, bless, blessure, bliss and blood, worst and wine/ are my saintly, thorny words. I am crowned by them!' The pariah-posturing of *Ranter* is dismissed: 'Sweeno learned one vital thing: You cannot// be wolf or stag alone in taiga treeline forever, peltcrested/ & snowhorned...' and we are told that 'in the Republic Finnbar would be found out/ for what he is'.

Significantly, the appearances of MacSweeney's antecedents are outnumbered by instances of the poet's compulsive self-naming:

Swanne, Ludlunatic,
MoonySwooney, Madstag, Lenin Wolfboy or

swiftly skilful terrace tantalising
push and run teaser fan pleaser Sweeno...

To these we may add 'Pookah Swoony', 'Anti-Lazarus Ludlunatic lolltongue Lollard', 'Sweeney Furioso', 'Mr Big Bang Fascinated' and many others. MacSweeney's 'foreign guises' often resemble sensational headlines and he applies this journalistic responsiveness to his new political heroes:

I stood proud alone
in the Stalingrad rain and read

the legend headlines: Fiend Poet
Show Dead With Broken Hat. Scald
Of The Steppes Before Firing Squad
Accused Of Dawdling On Lithic Tuff

With Shattered Socialist Heart - Gun
Seized. Friend Of Few Flees Not So
Lengthy Life With Unpunished Book.
But they were all too long or badly

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160 Free Pet With every Cage', p.221
161 'Anne Sexton Blues', p.263
162 'Shreds Of Mercy/ The Merest Shame', p.231. These lines riff on a passage from 'Wild Knitting', pp.135-6
163 'Sweeno, Sweeno', p.269
164 'Himself Bright Starre Northern Within', p.261
165 'Demons In My Pocket', p.238
166 'Up A Height And Raining', p.277
167 'Anne Sexton Blues', p.264
bust and the typeface choice at least\footnote{170}{'Demons In My Pocket', p.238} debatable.\footnote{170}{'Demons In My Pocket', p.238}

But the declension that places so much ironic weight on the word `debatable' is a shamed admission of MacSweeney's position of latecomer: however quickly a journalist responds, s/he is still responding to something done in the past. The journalistic aspect of the persona in \textit{Demons} carries a valedictory air, and MacSweeney is bidding this aspect of his writing farewell.

MacSweeney's compulsive self-naming is an ambiguous gesture: it is self-assertive, but it simultaneously splits the self into a multitude of demonic alter-egos that must be rejected. Such self-proclaiming and self-demonising is reminiscent of \textit{King Lear}, III, iv. When Lear and his party meet Edgar (disguised as Poor Tom) in the storm, Gloucester asks the seeming madman `What are you there? Your names?'. Edgar replies:

Poor Tom, that eats the swimming frog, the toad, the tadpole, the wall-newt and the water -; that in the fury of his heart, when the foul fiend rages, eats cow-dung for salads; swallows the old rat and the ditch-dog; drinks the green mantle of the standing pool; who is whipped from tithing to tithing and stocked, punished and imprisoned – who hath had three suits to his back, six shirts to his body...\footnote{171}{King Lear, III, iv. 125-132}

At this point in the play, Edgar has been banished (his daddy wants to murder him) and has taken on the disguise of a mad beggar called Poor Tom who lives in perpetual flight from a demon with many names (`the foul fiend', `flibbertigibbet' etc). So convincing is his performance, it raises the possibility that Edgar is mad indeed. His interminable lists of what he has suffered and what he has consumed reflect the customary self-advertising of Jacobean begging, but they are also a response to slander:

\begin{verbatim}
I heard myself proclaimed
And by the happy hollow of a tree
Escaped the hunt.\footnote{172}{Ibid., II, iii, 1-3.}
\end{verbatim}

To be `proclaimed' meant to be denounced as an outlaw and to be hunted. Edgar has been betrayed by his brother Edmund, and he responds by taking on an even more abject identity
that continually proclaims its own wretchedness. We can trace MacSweeney's impulse to identify with the despised brother back to Sal Mineo's incongruous appearance in *Black Torch*. Jackie Litherland encouraged MacSweeney's re-reading of Shakespeare at this time, and *Demons* also refers to *Othello* and *Hamlet*. These are the first Shakespearean allusions to find their way into his work, and are another sign of MacSweeney's confidence. MacSweeney was especially drawn to *King Lear* and to the character of Edgar in particular; this becomes clear in the last poems in *Demons*, when we meet MacSweeney's alter-ego 'Tom'.

Tom is a fellow patient MacSweeney meets while receiving treatment in the detox clinic. As we have seen, MacSweeney's impulse to over-identify with another has long been a mainstay of his poetry; and ever since *Jury Vet*, he has identified with fallen, abject figures, some of whom he despises. However, his redemptive identification with Tom provides *Demons* with some of its most humane moments, and signals the speaker's return to society. Although Tom only appears in the last two poems of the sequence ('Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots' and 'John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten'), he is a crucial symbol of the speaker's redemption, and the poems in which he appears are two of MacSweeney's finest achievements. Tom is in an even worse state than MacSweeney:

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Tom, you're a page in the book of life
but you're not a book
you're not the Collected Works of Tom – yet
there's no preface but the one they give you
there is no afterword because no one knows you
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Tom repays MacSweeney for his sympathy by enabling the poet to control a sense of pathos that is often lacking elsewhere in *Demons*. When MacSweeney describes his own suffering, he is often only able to avoid self-pity by indulging in theatricality; by contrast, the portrait of Tom is more emotionally nuanced.

By giving Tom a voice, MacSweeney continues a reciprocal line of Protestant civic-mindedness that began with the poet's early love for Pearl. That nurturing kindness was

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173 'Strap Down In Snowville', p.266, begins 'O hello, Othello, black and green bastardo, please be Mr Stepaside. I've arrived'; and 'Tom In The Market Square Outside Boots', p.283, ends with the speaker and Tom being 'carried away on shields'.

174 Ibid., p.281
eventually repaid by Jackie Litherland, whose love and support led to MacSweeney regaining his confidence and voice as a poet. Each of these instances of individuals reaching out to individuals is typical of the Protestant reformer who sets out single-handedly to save the world. It is important that this should be an individualist impulse. The doctors in the detox clinic where the poet is treated represent orderliness, system and hence subjugation. For this reason, MacSweeney reacts to their efforts with paranoid ingratitude. Sometimes the surliness of the patients can be wryly amusing:

And we’re here in the eternal land 
of sensible branflake breakfasts

with UHT crap semi-skimmed clarts
from France. We hated it even more
than we loathed ourselves... 175

Elsewhere, when MacSweeney compares the doctors to the Stasi or even to concentration camp guards, the reader is likely to be appalled. MacSweeney’s hysteria is only explicable if we can accept MacSweeney’s vision of the hospital as a symbol of England, and the patients as victims of poor government.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, MacSweeney’s rejection of collectivity is often expressed in political terms. Demons is firmly set during the dog days of the Tory government, and we would expect the poet’s ire to be directed at the Tories then clinging on to power. However, when MacSweeney attacks the Tories, it is not by close political analysis but by surreal guying:

Why can’t you get helium on the National Health?
Because the Tory Government has taken it all.
It is dispensed every day to Cabinet ministers.
Now they are gone completely myxomatosis bunny funny. 176

Or by radical attitudinising:

We did not burn enough magistrates’ houses. We executed one king but did not drag out enough Tories, and hang them from the greenwood tree. 177

175 ‘Nothing Are These Times’, p.254
176 ‘Demons Swarm Upon Our Man And Tell The World He’s Lost’, p.245
MacSweeney learned this rhetoric from Winstanley: "...for kingly power is like a great spread tree, if you lop the head or top bough, and let the other branches and root stand, it will grow again and recover former strength." Winstanley was an important figure for MacSweeney, for he continually draws parallels between social injustice during the time of the English Revolution and the Norman invasion: thus he unites the two historical periods that were crucial to MacSweeney. Winstanley also allows MacSweeney to solve his Socialist/Individualist polarity: the radical dissenters of the Seventeenth Century combined political dissent with libertarianism and excess. Nevertheless, Pearl was a more direct critic of the Tories, and MacSweeney seems to save his venom for the Labour party: "At least I'm not a replicant Labour party goon" he boasts, while putting the world to rights from his throne in 'the final Labour council-run/ public toilet on earth'. There are historical reasons for this disillusionment: MacSweeney claimed to have given up hope of political change in 1984, so by the time Tony Blair became leader of the Labour party, the Left of MacSweeney's generation had long since lost their political voice. Since the Left failed to produce a candidate to stand against Gordon Brown as party leader in 2007, we can now say that change was decisive:

Am I alone in my symmetrical vision
of this unequivocal stupidity? Look
at the Labour Party too & roar with laughter.
All, all, all, clowns of conceit.

Like Ranter before them, Pearl and Demons are not concerned with politics so much as karma, and the anger of the poems does not stem from political analysis so much as a competitive, Protestant spirit of how much personal conviction you have. However, just as Tom had allowed MacSweeney to express more nuanced emotional responses, he also enables a more subtle political vision. By now, the reader expects MacSweeney to provide a second antithetical antecedent for Edgar/Poor Tom, and in 'John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten' we find many allusions to Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem 'Tom's Garland: upon the unemployed'. Hopkins's poem is a hymn to social hierarchy and order:

177 'Strap Down in Snowville', p.267
179 'Demons In My Pocket', p.238
180 'Strap Down In Snowville', p.266
181 'Demons Swarm Upon Our Man And Tell The World He's Lost', p.245
Tom – garlanded with squat and surly steel
Tom; then Tom’s fallowbootfellow piles pick
By him and rips out rockfire homeforth – sturdy Dick;
Tom Heart-at-ease, Tom Navvy... 182

Hopkins’s Tom is a jolly, carefree navvy who accepts his lowly lot, in contrast with the agitating ne’er-do-wells who ‘infest the age’.183 Writing of this poem, Hopkins cited Radical Levellers and Socialists as ‘pests of society’.184 Whereas MacSweeney might once have shared Hopkins’s disdain, he now identifies with the pests, and we detect his shame at having been made unemployed: ‘There’s a pride in working for a living Tom, but it isn’t for us’.185 The puritan hates idleness, and in the past MacSweeney had always disdained Tom Pickard’s ‘dole wallah’ persona,186 but Pickard is another significant precedent for Tom, and the poets’ lifelong sibling rivalry is redeemed by MacSweeney’s brotherly relationship with Tom. More importantly, MacSweeney is pointing up the inadequacy of Hopkins’s position, and by continually, remorselessly evoking ‘Tom’s Garland’, he builds a damning critique of Hopkins’s reactionary rhetoric. Hopkins’s neologisms and spondees jar with the steady movement of the rest of the poem, just as his unsympathetic posturing jars with MacSweeney’s nurturing, protective, paternal attitude: ‘Tom, dear garlanded friend Tom, you’re not that strong. // And if anyone picked on you, they have to peck at my fiststance darkdance first’.187 This is another sign of MacSweeney’s confidence over his material and his precursors, and it is connected to the theme of self-criticism that makes Demons so compelling; for in earlier poems we have heard MacSweeney make equally complacent references to navvies, and to the underclass.

Pearl and Demons represent the culmination of MacSweeney’s poetry, and in the final five poems of Demons (that is, the Zero Hero quartet and then ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’), MacSweeney is writing at the height of his powers. As usual, MacSweeney is at his best when, having established a persona, landscape, vocabulary, and a palette of tones, he

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183 Hopkins, p.103
184 See Hopkins, p.291-92
185 ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, p.285
187 ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, p.286
prepares to sign off and move on. Therefore, I will conclude this discussion of *Demons* by looking in more detail at the way its final poem weaves together strands of politics, journalism and personal redemption. With its minimal punctuation, its preference for very long lines, and its lines in italics or capital letters, 'John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten' looks like one of the loose, baggy, capacious poems that MacSweeney would write after *Demons*. However, while MacSweeney’s line has slackened to a rhythmical sort of prose, like that of the Authorised Version, the poem is artfully constructed. The alternation of the speaker’s fantasies of political empowerment and the reality of life in detox is handled with great skill:

> I met Cromwell & Milton & Blake yesterday and they were lost as us, funny stout men and one blind looking for the dreams of Albion. Pen-ready men with quill of swanne.

> Tom, you put your right shoe on your right foot and the left on the left.\(^{188}\)

Any other poet would have used such contrasts to pursue a satirical or confessional agenda, but MacSweeney is attempting a more ambitious welding of the two. The poem opens with a vision of autumnal England that blends politics and religion with the natural world:

> The long shadows of gold October stamped into the earth of England. Amber crowns of trees shredded in the wake of the wind whose invisible straps unwind allowing previously strapped grasses to become unfleeced in air and have echoes and tunes like chapel hymns along the arm of the law.\(^{189}\)

The wind that caresses England and makes it sing is a wild, liberating element that frees the country by shredding the crowns from the trees: an image that recalls Winstanley’s writings. MacSweeney’s violently individualist republicanism is depicted as an all-powerful force of nature that contrasts sharply with his weakness as an individual man; more than once he attributes his political radicalism to the childhood abuse he suffered:

> *When did you last see your father* is a laugh for me Tom, he was a jellied-eel traitor to my poetic revolutionary heart for always I have the axe in my hand. 1917. I have the hood and the axe and the unsmilingness. I will do it as a duty Tom, for waste must be punished. O Tom, what am I saying?\(^{190}\)

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\(188\) Ibid., p.285

\(189\) Ibid., p.284. MacSweeney puns on the Northumbrian dialect meaning of ‘law’, which refers to the uplands around Allendale.
In these lines, MacSweeney looks back in a kind of horror at the antisocial position he adopted in ‘Daddy Wants To Murder Me’, and this marks the last appearance of the poet’s father in his work.

‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’ ends (and with it the sequence of Demons) with a sudden declaration of allegiance to the female: ‘!God Save the Queen!’ 191 Whenever I read this profoundly ambiguous line, I think of Peter Sellers as Dr Strangelove, miraculously standing up from his wheelchair in the final seconds before nuclear holocaust destroys the world, exclaiming ‘Mein Fuhrer, I can walk!’ 192 Both lines are powerful and suggestive; they are sudden reversals-of-fortune that erupt out of nowhere like an apocalyptic augury. I also think of the infamous final sentence of Saul Bellow’s novel Dangling Man: ‘Long live regimentation!’ 193 MacSweeney’s intentions are equally inscrutable: like Bellow, he might be suggesting that his protagonist cannot suffer self-determination any longer and seeks refuge in an orderly system. Alternatively, he might simply be referring to the nightly playing of the national anthem at the end of the BBC broadcast. In the context of ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, ‘!God Save the Queen!’ asks to be read as a quote from a Sex Pistols song, linking it to MacSweeney’s punk-influenced lineage of dissent; but the line is also an unironic tribute to Jackie Litherland, the ‘warrior queen’ to whom the collection is dedicated.

MacSweeney has progressed from rejecting the female (in ‘The Last Bud’), objectifying her (in Odes), abusing her (in Jury Vet) and driving her away (in Ranter and ‘Finnbar’s Lament’), to engaging in a profound sympathy with her. His next major collection, Horses in Boiling Blood, will celebrate her. Although Demons employs familiar tropes such as woman-as-saviour/ shelter/ mother, and can be sentimental (‘breasts / abreast in the argent dawn’ 194), MacSweeney’s portrait of Litherland is the most complex portrayal of another person in his work. Litherland’s character is by turns erotic (‘it’s amazing what we did considering’ 195) and exasperated (‘that’s the story of your life, almost-man’ 196).

190 Ibid., p.284. MacSweeney’s father was born in London and returned to live there, hence the ‘jellied eel traitor’.
191 Ibid., p.290
192 Dr Strangelove: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (Stanley Kubrick, 1964)
193 Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (London: John Lehman, 1946)
194 ‘Your Love Is A Swarm And An Unbeguiled Swanne’, p.265
195 ‘Hooray Demons Salute The Forever Lost Parliament Of Barry And Jacqueline’, p.246
196 Ibid., p.247

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MacSweeney’s sympathy with Litherland is remarkable, particularly in ‘We Offer You One Third Off Plenitude’ and ‘The Horror’, poems that adopt her persona in order to depict the poet’s hospitalisation. Being able to view a situation from someone else’s point of view is a sign of maturity; the more difficult feat of writing convincingly from someone else’s point of view is a sign of artistic maturity.

MacSweeney celebrates Litherland’s ‘warrior queen’ aspect throughout Demons, and especially in ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’. Litherland takes pride of place in the poet’s symbolic system, where horses are equated with sexual prowess and political empowerment:

My lover Tom my lover the poet is not a loader of rifles
a washer of signal cloths
she’s a leader Tom she’s a high-stepping jade herself
not one quick finger far from the pin

Horses feature heavily throughout the poem, and MacSweeney presents himself as a fearsome Hotspur character, charging across Northumberland to depose a king. In many of MacSweeney’s earlier poems, horses symbolised feelings of guilt for sexual betrayals, but in ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, he dreams of being reunited with his horse; the result is unsettling, comical and yet strangely moving:

Law with the wind in my face as I mince springingly princingly
on my wincing jade,
bit-jaw strapped in, fist-firm, fury in my heel spur and black frock coat
which can only bring death to the demons and the kings of frippery of England:

Law on the horizon and law in the lonnen at Loaning Head:
Stirrup-high I turn for the smell on the heather fellwind, still
on my mount, still but nostril light, building Obelisks to Chartists
and we stroked goodnight the muzzles of upland high-hooved horses
because they reminded us of women lost in the dawn of the dew and dandelions.

This horse imagery brings us full circle, for we first encountered it in 1968’s ‘The Last Bud’. MacSweeney’s continual changes of style obscure the persistence of his inner system of symbols. A reader of, say, Blake, Yeats or Hughes can soon situate symbols on a sort of psychic map of the poet. By contrast, MacSweeney’s endeavour retains a greater

197 ‘John Bunyan To Johnny Rotten’, p. 287
198 Ibid., p. 287
degree of privacy — many of his poems seem to pin their hopes of success on the conviction of their author — and the lonely room of the autodidact and the ward of the detox hospital can look worryingly similar. This privacy is registered in various ways: it is obviously there in MacSweeney’s cryptic 70s work, but it is also there in the unpredictable, spiky surface of the Demons poems. A line like ‘And the leaves in the trees seem to whisper Louise because they’re nuts Tom’\(^{199}\) seems to rise out of nowhere, and a casual reader may be charmed or infuriated by it. But it takes on an added dimension if the reader recognises the allusion to ‘Louise’ by Maurice Chevalier. Chevalier’s name means ‘horseman’, and the word is used in one of Hopkins’s most famous poems, the vision of religious uplift and resurrection that is ‘The Windhover’, in which ‘chevalier’ is rhymed with ‘lovelier’. The degree of intentionality behind such wordplay is debatable, but it forms part of the reading experience, and MacSweeney will take this kind of densely allusive cross-channel punning to an extreme in his next collection, which continues the equestrian symbolism: Horses in Boiling Blood.

I hope I have shown some of the ways in which Demons forms a culmination of MacSweeney’s career. The cross-referencing, the recourse to an intricate system of symbols, and the allusions to his own back catalogue are only the most obvious examples of what MacSweeney has carried forward in Demons: the collection succeeds through tremendous linguistic resourcefulness, and this has been earned over the course of a lifetime of restless self-testing. Because of MacSweeney’s unusual developmental arc, Demons displays the kind of brash, hubristic, allusive, raw dazzle that one associates with a precocious first collection; but combines this with the summative, earned, technically resourceful, self-aware performance that one associates with late work.

\(^{199}\) Ibid., p.288
Conclusion

Barry MacSweeney died on May 9th, 2000. *Wolf Tongue* was published two years later. The volume occupies a position somewhere between a selected and a collected poems, and by bringing much of MacSweeney’s poetry back into print, it allows the reader to survey the vast sweep of this extraordinary writer’s work – if we are willing to rise to the challenge. MacSweeney dares us to ask as much of poetry as he did; to be as eclectic and adventurous; not to align ourselves with a particular school or movement; to join him in the risk.

Looking back from the vantage point of *Pearl*, we can see the breakthrough MacSweeney made in ‘The Last Bud’ more clearly. His earlier poems had failed, either by exhibiting flagrant imitation of his precursor poets or by indulging inscrutable private symbols of his inner turmoil. Only by combining his obsession with literary priority and his personal symbolic system was MacSweeney able to unlock his poetry: in ‘The Last Bud’, MacSweeney takes on Bunting and Prynne – two of his most significant father-figures – and identifies himself with Bonney; in so doing, he is able to describe the trauma of his abortive poetic birth. It took him a lifetime to find his way back to this point: in *Pearl* he again identifies with the silenced, rejected daughter, and again produces some of his finest work.

A conservative reading would see MacSweeney as having been distracted by a benighted quest to discover what he already knew; but beating a path to your own door is not dishonourable employment for a poet, and I hope that I have shown what MacSweeney gained from his unusual trajectory, his obsessive circling of themes and motifs, his alert responsiveness and his accretive intelligence. MacSweeney’s commitment to an ambitious and demanding vision of what poetry could do, predicated on his often idiosyncratic understanding of historical and religious contexts, enabled him to produce a body of work unlike that of any other poet.

Appreciation of MacSweeney’s achievement will grow in tandem with our understanding of the considerable challenges he faced. In addition to the dichotomy between directed, front-brain, collectivist poetry and libertarian, excessive, individualist poetry, MacSweeney had to square a number of circles: his was a Romantic sensibility, and yet he
was drawn to Modernist poetics; he remained committed to his social and regional origins, but also to avant-garde art; he was hungry for recognition but given to disguise; his poetry was fuelled by his often turbulent inner life, and yet it eschewed confessional appeals or other simplifications. His finest work holds such oppositions in charged proximity with each other, and the reader must adopt a similar position: a purely autobiographical reading of MacSweeney’s work would be as misleading as one that eschewed autobiography altogether; and to describe him as a follower of Bunting would be as disingenuous as to deny Bunting’s influence out of hand.

A more integrated personality might have resolved some of these conflicts sooner; indeed, might never understood himself in such oppositional terms in the first place. But MacSweeney did not have an integrated personality: his was a polemical, polarising imagination, and the reader must work harder to appreciate the coherence of his vision. MacSweeney’s temperament surely had much to do with this, but we should remember that the poet with non-literary, working class origins must contain and preserve oppositions if they are to develop. They must carry an argument within themselves. The advantages to this situation are closely tied to the dangers: ignorance of what is ‘expected’ and ‘suitable’; naivety; iconoclastic ambition; a sense of mission; an almost guilty sense of responsibility towards those whom poetry excludes and the temptation to resolve this guilt by embracing elitism or simplemindedness. In the twentieth century, English poetry was enriched by a line of autodidact poets who retained a sense of estrangement from the literary world: we think of poets as different as George Barker, David Jones, Basil Bunting, Ted Hughes, Roy Fisher and Ken Smith. MacSweeney’s best work places him in their company, and I hope that this thesis has demonstrated the coherence of MacSweeney’s oeuvre, and the persistence of many of his themes and motifs, as well as honouring the variety of approaches he brought to bear on his material.
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