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ARTICLE

Peter Manson's Language Surfaces

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The article analyses the conception and construction of 'the language surface' in Peter Manson's poetry. It explores how Manson's dual commitment to language's materiality and its fundamental ambiguity effects a relation between a kind of 'secretive' non-communication and a kind of disclosure or, Manson's own term, 'candour'. In an interview with Tim Allen (2006), Manson claims that his prose work, *Adjunct: An Undigest* (2001), drew 'everything that was happening to [him] up into the language surface' – disclosure of sorts – yet, across his more formal poems, there's a kind of obfuscation: '...I could use my formal interest in the language surface almost to "distract" myself from the often quite personal material which was being drawn in underneath'. After some introductory comments about how Manson's language surfaces are constructed, the primacy they afford to the materiality of language, and the dynamic subject positions they solicit, this article offers readings of two poems, each of which presents a coded commentary on the construction of the language surface. In 'raven A' (in *Factitious Airs*, 2016), the poem thinks its own language surface by invoking a stringed instrument constructed out of taut cat skin, on which 'the position of the cat's nipples can still be seen'. In 'Four Darks in Red' (collected in *For the Good of Liars* 2006) the reader is invited to think the relation between surface and buried personal material alongside the effacement of deep-vein cinnabar extraction in the application of vermilion red paint. The article ends with comments towards a poetics of 'candour'.

Keywords: Peter Manson; language surface; subjectivity; materiality of language

The first sentence of Peter Manson's¹ essay 'Let it Be' asserts that '[a]ll language is ambiguous'.² For Manson, everyday communication relies on a process of disambiguation that is always limited by this fundamental condition of language. Despite seeking to evade language's ambiguity through dialogue, we may only approach shared meaning, in Manson's words, 'asymptotically'. 'Asymptote' is a

geometrical term for 'a line which approaches nearer and nearer to a given curve, but does not meet it within a finite distance'.³ Potentially, the lines we open in dialogue fall close enough to ensure the adequate transmission of instrumental content – argument, imperative, apology or plea – but they never fall together or overlap, approaching their destinations only insofar as they veer away from them.

Poetry for Manson, on the other hand, is 'the original, unqualified statement of language';⁴ the presentation of language itself in its fundamental ambiguity, outside dialogic strictures.⁵ A reader of poetry doesn't have the benefit of an interlocutor across the room. Their production of meaning is much more open-ended. Ambiguity cannot be negotiated down till it dips below some threshold of 'adequate' shared meaning, resulting in a secret released and a secret kept. The reader of poetic language – instead of being bounced around inside the shifting shape of a pragmatic speech situation, and constantly encountering the limits inaugurated by dialogue – is only rebuffed by the material properties of the 'original, unqualified statement of language' on the page. They also extend an asymptotic line towards the text, but they are bound, if their wish is to discover or finally meet some unambiguous 'truth' of the poem, to an infinite task.⁶

This essay's first contention is that Peter Manson expresses his commitment to this understanding of poetic language in his own poetics by developing a specific conception of 'the language surface' across interviews, critical writing and his poems' encoded reflexive commentaries.⁷ In much of his formal poetry, Manson's 'language surfaces' resist the reader's proprietary will to disambiguation; his poems' non-communication is formally built-in. In the playful ways in which they rupture communicability – for example, in their foregrounding of the acoustic, oral, sculptural or visual elements of language, and so typically framing any 'sense' based on semantic coherence as subsidiary – Manson's poems ostensibly withhold direct expression. However, Manson's language surfaces do not simply block communication; they also offer Manson, he admits in an interview with Tim Allen, the means of writing, 'with a candour I couldn't have attained by more direct means.'⁸ There is a complex assertion here of an indirect sharing, in which it is exactly the language surfaces' modes of

resistance, their misdirection, that inculcates frankness of a sort. Non-communicative acts can nonetheless summon the (indirectly) communicative.

Although Manson's poems at times can feel hermetic in their resistance, then, without necessarily feeling dense, the poet is not subject to solitary confinement as in '*au secret*'.⁹ There is no straightforward sense in which Manson's poems annex a space of withheld material,¹⁰ a potential refuge for an oppressed lyric subject, in order to escape readerly modes of surveillance or interrogation.¹¹ Nor is the reader co-opted into a coterie of secret-knowers by following clues towards sites of confessional unburdening. Manson's poems preclude simple distinctions between public and private, confessional and hermetic, open and closed, reader and writer, and his language surfaces stage a dynamics of concealment and disclosure that results from his commitment to both the materiality and the fundamental ambiguity of the language on the page.¹²

It is impossible not to mention that Manson's claim for our 'asymptotic approach' to dialogic meaning invokes the same geometrical analogy that Jacques Lacan uses in his essay, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I'. Lacan uses the analogy to express the disjunction between the infant and its ideal I: the fictional, unified subject with which it identifies itself.¹³ Manson's diagnosis of the difficulties of approaching shared meaning in dialogue is lent further complication here: not only is Manson committed to a poetry, and to a concept of the language surface, that seemingly isolates the positions of reader and writer, foreclosing simple transport between them, he also invokes Lacan to gesture towards each position's own fundamental splitting; prior to socialisation, the self is already fragmented, identifying itself with an ideal it can never attain. This drama of the split subject and its relation to language (though perhaps not straightforwardly 'Lacanian') is consistently staged across Manson's poems, which seem to solicit, from reader and writer both, a kind of subjectivity in process, bound to subjection to text.

This essay seeks to establish that these manifold tensions and complexities are actively maintained by Manson's specific conception of the language surface and its

craft across his works. Following some groundwork exploring how language surfaces actually operate in Peter Manson's work, with a particular emphasis on Manson's interest in the materiality of language, I'll offer a reading of Manson's poem 'Four Darks in Red', from his 1999 Barque Press pamphlet, *Birth Windows*, collected in *For the Good of Liars*, a particularly instructive poem for exploring the peculiar relations Manson produces between non-communication and withholding, and on the other hand, indirect sharing, in this case indexed to the hidden labours of cinnabar extraction.

One of the more general and immediately accessible operations performed by language surfaces across Peter Manson's work is their formal unification of diverse linguistic materials, gleaned from disparate sources both public and private. Rather than resolving differences, this unification maintains the non-identity of the materials it organises ('No solid reason grounds the piping feet', we read in Manson's 'Lancer's Gap').¹⁴ Manson's poem 'raven A', published in *Halfcircle* magazine in 2012 and recently collected in *Factitious Airs* (2016), reads:

raven A

it begins Softest car, abattoir batch
because I can't speak
speech placed completely and verifiably beyond use

if it seems to happen
outside my head and continues
We dry things that carry the sea in a bag

only that makes a window in permanent slamming in blindness
still only a window
unhinged

love is not blind
I mean seriously
but a generalisation of eyes about the set

theme

Settling down by scaled steps into being
where the cock and the hen and the fox are

in tawny unison flattening hair to a scale
frayed into feather eroded to dander
why can it not go on so

you know where the writing ends
and the thing typing enters the mid-part of
if I could caw

to you across the intrusive spur
to understand
to me as an infinitive

it would turn out
On the skin of the best shamisen
the position of the cat's nipples can still be seen

as it always does
having opened once
Blow the sour entrails into the hopper of meal

how can it close
The cross a torn coccyx aliquot part
imagine disowning that

breath withheld between quotes
in a locked groove
the automatic return tone-arm never gets to reach

the intro haunted by the outro¹⁵

'raven A' relates found language – 'completely and verifiably beyond use', for example, is the title of a Guardian newspaper comment piece from 2000 on the decommission of IRA weapons¹⁶ – to ostensibly 'poetic' material – 'Softest car, abattoir batch', 'The cross a torn coccyx aliquot part'.¹⁷ The poem's three-line stanzas offer an initial step towards the composition of the language surface by visibly organising the different kinds of language in play. However, beneath this superficial organising principle, the poem's formal structure is further tightened by the intervention of a frustrated, retrospective commentary that questions the poem's utility, woven by Manson across the poem's stanza breaks, pulling its diverse linguistic materials into further relation: 'Softest Car, abattoir batch', for example is preceded by this critical voice, 'it begins', and followed by 'because I can't speak'.¹⁸ The maintenance of the capital S in 'Softest' (as with the other found-language fragments) ensures both that the two modes remain distinct, and that we understand the initial 'beginning' or 'intro' to have been deferred, embedded within a new one retrospectively applied. In later stanzas, the same dispirited voice that began 'it begins' can be traced from 'if I could caw // to you across the intrusive spur' to 'it would turn out [...] as it always does'.¹⁹ But the voice also pulls two lines of found language into its commentary, lifted from www.gojapango.com, which offer an instructive initial schema for thinking the relation between Manson's language surfaces and what they carry:

On the skin of the best shamisen
the position of the cat's nipples can still be seen²⁰

The shamisen is a three-stringed Japanese court instrument similar to the lute, with a long, fretless neck and a cuboid resonating chamber made of gourd, traditionally bound in cat skin. The poem thinks its own writing by evoking the tanning process ('in tawny unison flattening hair to a scale/frayed into feather eroded to dander'), pointing to the application of consistent pressure upon a surface from which the remnants of living matter fall away. The cat's nipples are striking because they mark a point of incompleteness in the abstractive process of the cat's tanning: the finished

product, the 'skin of the best shamisen', maintains a trace of the prior lived relations of the cat (its nipples), so that the eventual surface binding the shamisen's hollow gourd bears witness, however indirectly, to the dependences and sufferings it effaces. When the shamisen is plucked, everything we might index to the cat's nipples resonates: their position and number, as well as the unique tension, thickness and suppleness of the skin that holds them, lend the amplified vibrations their distinct sound signature; the cat's prior existence is indirectly sung. As well as offering an initial schema for thinking through how the craft of Manson's language surfaces both efface and maintain the conditions impelling their creation then, the shamisen cat skin also anticipates the privilege Manson affords to his poem's sonics and their activation when read aloud, which I'll return to when looking at 'Four Darks in Red'.²¹

Manson's most well-known publication, the prose work, *Adjunct: An Undigest*, also presents a language surface that works to unify a diverse range of language fragments. The book is a transcribed and edited notebook, kept for seven years, in which pieces of found language, often selected for the comic effect yielded by their ambiguity, are recorded and allocated a page according to a random number table, accumulating there alongside relatively direct notations of lived experience:

'E = mc² up the budgies bum. Disconcerted by an old episode of *The Herbs*. You want to have met me before I became a geomancer. Diarrhoea smells of Lilt. Consciousness expanding again. May contain nut traces. Skin tightens on face.'²²

The basic language surface here is guaranteed by the fragments' random allocation, with the effect that the more straightforwardly personal material is relieved of its confessional or exhibitory sense having been, in Manson's words, 'drawn up' into the same language surface occupied by the other fragments in play: 'There's only so upset you can find something', Manson observes in an interview with Tim Allen, 'when it's resting next to the sentence 'Jobby by Hans Arp'.²³ That the personal material is not experienced as 'upset', in the sense of 'raised up', testifies to the levelling effect *Adjunct's* language surface submits its fragments to – though the cognate verb 'to

upset', or to cause distress, is also gestured towards. Elsewhere, in "'Love Poetry'", a prose piece collected in *Between Cup and Lip*, Manson problematizes the impulse to represent in language the sensory impressions that precede it. 'Every time I tried to settle on something which felt as if it ought to be a sensory image,' he writes, 'it turned out to be groups of words, which didn't describe the image but which were it.'²⁴ Manson's texts consistently recall the reader back to the signifier rather than the signified, another sense in which Manson's language surfaces tend towards the undermining both of hierarchies and straightforward distinctions then, insofar as they avoid the 'upset' image, or the figure, emerging from the background of the material of the language on the page: the words are the image, and Manson is explicit about his preference for poetry that 'makes its points' by 'embedding them in the material properties of the language'.²⁵

Writing on *Adjunct*, Craig Dworkin argues that this levelling effect complicates tensions between public and private, inner and outer: in *Adjunct* it becomes 'increasingly difficult' he writes, to 'distinguish the falsely intimate address of public language from the coldly unemotional register in which Manson jots genuinely personal material, the observed from the confessional, voyeurism from exhibitionism.'²⁶ Because the reader's approach to meaning in *Adjunct* is guided far more by the contiguity of seemingly unrelated materials from disparate sources than by similarity between them at the level of sense, distinguishing distinct modes of address – public or personal, intimate or distant – and then selecting them as discrete objects of scrutiny feels like a wild goose chase, arbitrarily demanding of the text that, for example, its more personal material is expressed with little mediation. On the other side of the language surface, the writer's side, Manson claims that to compose poems guided by a will to expression would be akin to 'emo[ting] at a brick wall.'²⁷ Perhaps counter-intuitively, the only way in which we could conceive a language surface as a wall that blocks disclosure entirely then, would be if it were, hypothetically, to wield poetic language as if it were a straightforwardly communicative instrument of confession or exhibition; in poetry, such a claim to simple disclosure would only serve to undermine the fundamentally social nature

of language. By this schema, the poems that would presume to share the most, to reveal the most about the feelings impelling their creation, are the least social, the most narcissistic. Although the language surface is resistant then, and although, for Manson, '[u]ltimately, you're alone with the text, whether you're the writer or the reader',²⁸ thinking of Manson's resistant language surfaces as walls through which nothing passes seems like the wrong metaphor.

A more useful, preliminary metaphor might be the language surface as a window onto darkness, before which, looking out, the subject is met by an uncanny reflection: a surface that does not allow any simple recognition of a pre-verified self, on behalf of reader or writer, but rather encourages, in the process of encountering language and submitting oneself to its otherness, an open-ended subjective process undermining the solitary position of the writing/reading self. In his interview with Tim Allen, Manson discusses the influence of the American poet Clark Coolidge, proposing a further topological schema for the relation between the language surface and the conditions of its creation:

Eventually... I found a synthesis where I could use my formal interest in the language surface almost to 'distract' myself from the often quite personal material being drawn in underneath. It's not quite the 'pure psychic automatism' the Surrealists spoke of, but it's the only way I've found of making poems which stay interesting to me, in that I don't feel that I stand in a particularly privileged relation to them: I have to work at them, and with them, in the same way any other reader would. I'm usually the last, to know what they're about.²⁹

'Personal material' in *Adjunct* is recorded and 'drawn up' into the language surface, yet elsewhere it can also be 'drawn in underneath', by allowing the writing of a poem to carry itself. Manson's qualification of the language surface here as a surface on which distraction is played out offers the simplest route into talking about the material properties of the language surfaces he composes; the question of what *in language* provides the means of distraction, leads us towards Manson's immersion

in the sound associations, metonymic combinations, phonological ticks and stutters that comprise the peculiar, vibratory mobility of his language surfaces, on which I'll elaborate towards the end of the essay. That through 'distracted' writing, the writer's relation to the text begins to resemble any other reader's, however, also points towards the dynamic subject positions these surfaces solicit. In one of the many fragments in *Adjunct* commenting self-reflexively on its composition, the 'writer' submits themselves to a distancing process guaranteeing their continuing existence, albeit in a shifting, dynamic form: 'the language surface.', Manson writes, 'Which is not to say that everything is language, but that the writing makes a place where death and disaster can be read as well as lived'.³⁰ The author is 'othered'³¹ by submitting themselves to the material properties of language: the compulsion resulting in the solitary act of writing becomes displaced, as a kind of relief,³² by the social experience of reading; 'the total process of writing... is a social one at every stage other than the "siege in the room"',³³ Manson insists, following Beckett. The sociality of language is foregrounded in the same movement by which the authorial subject is relinquished.

This fluidity between private and public, inside and outside in Manson's works is reflected in the demands he makes of readership, not least his own. His formal poetry, Manson explains, is 'full of deliberately distracting word-collocations which mess with the reader's ability to parse the text'. However, this process of obfuscation is guided by his commitment to the creation of poetic artefacts that operate as, he writes, 'transitional object[s] between human consciousness and its material basis'.³⁴ Another psychoanalytic term worn lightly in Manson's writing, the transitional object (developed by D.W. Winnicott)³⁵ stands in for the infant's direct relation to its mother as it begins to achieve relative independence on its way to selfhood, accepting external as well as internal realities, and securing their interrelation. Transitional objects – often a doll, or an item of clothing, or a blanket – enable us to overcome our omnipotent, narcissistic pretensions as children. We overcome our sense that we create our mothers, for example, and correlatively, the world. Transitional objects both circumscribe the loss of that original, material relation and ensure the ability to move fluidly between inside and outside.

Manson claims in 'Let it Be' that there are levels at which a poetry that accepts language's fundamental ambiguity is able to stand as 'a profound act of reconciliation with our status as material beings in a material universe, animate only for the time being'.³⁶ But I think reconciliation too passive. Manson's language surfaces might behave like an infant's transitional blanket insofar as they undercut narcissism, refusing, by their 'finely-measured openness',³⁷ any straightforward reflection of the reader's concerns or, and this is rather familiar, resisting any proprietary will to impose a final meaning. But in the particular way in which they privilege the materiality of language, they also continually refer the reader to the physical presence of their body, the vocal apparatus, the breath, as they activate the acoustic, oral, sculptural and visual qualities of the language, eliciting far more active, dynamic and tense processes of engagement with our material basis, through this language, than 'reconciliation' would suggest. As Ellen Dillon argues in her "A poetry at the gates of existence': negotiating (with) the outside in some work by Peter Gizzi and Peter Manson",³⁸ Manson's 'proprioceptive' poems, in this case his recent long sequence 'Sourdough Mutation' specifically, elicit a *praxis* of reading rooted in the need for constant readjustment between inside and outside.

'Four Darks in Red' is the title of an oil-on-canvas painting by Mark Rothko from 1958, in which four rectangles of varying darkness both emerge from and recede into an underlying, though non-uniform, red. One of the four strips of darkness is of a saturated, glossy black, while the others are translucent to varying degrees, so that the underlying red becomes a constitutive element in their eventual colour, subverting any clear distinction between foreground and background. Manson's poem of the same name isn't simply 'about' the Rothko painting, though it does seem preoccupied at points with the extraction of cinnabar ore, a form of mercury sulphide, and the primary source for both environmental mercury and, perhaps more pertinently, vermilion red paint pigment:

Four Darks in Red

The pain is near celibate in the bridal tune,
our new wild process rotting in the wrong

case.

I stood it though and thought
not that I died then in the smell of bonus
brought on as violent asthma in a burning month
to stammer clear of, canted.

Singular as mud
the flyspeck paints a generation out.

A learned support to the left breast, speak hardly
at all now, sing.

Lift the maquette up, broken
to the new yolk-bound solution
of a deep-rooted sleep problem.

In ear the events bid high in a run on hollow gold
brought forward along the jaw
by the headlamp negating contrast
to pulverise effort headstrong in the fur
(fit draped in cinnabar
moth that you choke on gladly)

and only for so long
let this name come to the fore
as a paradigm's endgame³⁹

The poem affixes an occluded mouth that stutters, fits and chokes in song, to the often deadly process of cinnabar ore extraction. Both are drawn into further relation through the apparent transformation of the facture of paint – the blacks and reds of Rothko's paintings, and correspondingly, the material properties of the poem – into the more fragile, twitching and short-lived materiality of the 'cinnabar/moth', a red-and-black-winged moth common to Europe, and Western and Central Asia. This

alongside closely layered lexical fields relating to child birth and dentistry.⁴⁰ I want to suggest in what follows the sense in which we might understand Manson's language surfaces as peculiarly non-static and vibratory, as surfaces that demand a kind of participation which undermines the kinds of selfhood we might expect to find consolidated in poetics that foreground communication in more straightforwardly declarative ways at the level of sense.

At first glance 'The pain is near celibate in the bridal tune' reads as if it's been modulated using something like the Oulipian N+7 process to which Manson submitted 'Candle in the Wind' in 1998 – the song by Bernard Taupin, reworked as an elegy for Princess Diana, and performed by Elton John at her funeral. Replacing each noun with the seventh noun following it in a dictionary, Manson garbles Taupin's lyrics to create 'Canine in the Windsor'. Taupin's lines become 'And it seems to me you lived your ligament/Like a canine in the Windsor:/Never fading with the superabundance/When the raj set in'.⁴¹ This interest in the relations words hold with others materially similar to them at the level of letter or phoneme guides the composition of Manson's language surfaces. The distractive compulsion seeks satisfaction not by substituting words for others based on shared sense, by use of metaphor for example, but by close attention to and immersion in the associations embedded in each word's material make up, their phonemes and cognates. Reading the line 'The pain is near celibate in the bridal tune', then, the reader is left with both the experience of having just missed, asymptotically perhaps, a previous iteration of the line, and the possibility of further iterations. Sometimes the ghost of another iteration of the line persists: 'celibate', for example seems to attain its force by virtue of its negative differentiation from 'celebrate', which seems to hover somewhere within reach due to the phonetic contiguity of 'celibate' and 'bridal'.⁴² Nonetheless placed, finally iterated, Manson's lines often appear to interpellate the sonic environs and proximities of each word, both when voiced aloud and visually when read on the page.⁴³

In October 2014, Peter Manson read from a notebook at Glasgow's monthly poetry night The Verse Herse. Having distributed photocopied pages to the audience,

Manson read the discrete lines, fragments and early drafts of complete poems, voicing too his corrections on the page. Reading the photocopies, it is striking how often certain words are crossed out and replaced with phonologically similar words, both obscuring the 'original', and displacing it along a chain of associations primarily based on sound and the mechanics of vocalisation rather than sense: 'Christ' becomes 'client'; 'pickled', 'pricked'; and 'shorn', 'short' in a draft of 'I', a poem collected later in *For the Good of Liars*.⁴⁴ In 'A Funeral in Sense', 'At the point of acquisition of loss/the body eclipsed by language/snarled on the solar wind', then 'sucks on the solar wind', then, in publication, again in *For the Good of Liars*, 'sucks on the molar wind'.⁴⁵

Approaching 'Four Darks in Red' without the benefit of the fragments that eventually made their way into the poem (though, there are three lines in *me generation* from 1997 – 'Events part in ear high run of this', 'The fit draped in cinnabar that you choke on gladly', and perhaps more tenuously, 'Where they pulled effort through' – that appear in 'Four Darks in Red' in modulated form)⁴⁶ a similar process of selection can be read. 'Burning month' is the first instance of an occluded 'mouth' in the poem, and points towards *glossodynia* or 'burning mouth syndrome', a condition in which the tongue and other parts of the mouth are felt to be burning – we might think of the toxic fumes produced by the application of heat to cinnabar ore here, and the impact of sulphurous fumes and mercury exposure on the vocal apparatus. 'Fit draped in cinnabar/moth that you choke on gladly', again occludes the mouth, but also, if the 'you' is read as the object of self-regard, suggests an auto-erotic mouth, not kissing itself but choking on itself 'gladly': invoking the simultaneous experience of solace and fragmentation in the distraction provided by the movement in writing from one word to the next. It is worth noting too that when voicing the poem aloud the reader is consistently referred back to the physical workings of the mouth. The equilibrium of the language surface is ensured in part by avoiding orthodox, chiming sound patterns produced by alliteration and assonance,⁴⁷ so that the poem can explore phonetic matter, not least in the lace of 'o' sounds through 'our', 'process', 'rotting', 'wrong', 'stood', 'though', 'thought',

'not', 'bonus', 'brought', 'violent' and 'month' in the first six lines, their consonants shaping, enclosing, moulding the air expelled through a resolutely open mouth, without pushing the reader outward to a particular representation rising above the surface, consolidated, evolved or emblematised by the auditory patterning of the words.

The poem at times makes distraction explicit, not least in the conglomeration of 'forward', 'headlamp', 'effort', 'headstrong' and 'fore', in which words spring from the etymological roots and phonological matter of the words preceding them, a generative process that becomes in Manson's more recent work 'Sourdough Mutation' a fundamental prosodic principle.⁴⁸ 'Effort' is from Old French, *esfort*, which derives from Medieval Latin *exfortiāre*, from *ex* – out and *fortis* – strong.⁴⁹ 'Strong' then takes its place in 'headstrong', following both 'headlamp' and, by way of false etymology *frons* (from 'effrontery', which follows 'effort' in the dictionary), the Latin for forehead. Elsewhere, etymology and phonology form a vertical thread counterposing song to speech through 'tune', into 'canted' (from *cantare*, 'to sing'), then 'singular' and 'sing', and, through 'cant' pointing to the development of an outsider language in song. An initial, speculative reading of this poem might emphasise the way in which ambiguities in language are harnessed and sustained through this playful unfolding of phonemes and the massing of other discrete bits, or 'giblets' as Robin Purves calls them,⁵⁰ so that a preoccupation with labour and childbirth (the obsessive loops through effort and headstrong, etc., seem to circumscribe an obscured image of crowning, for example) interact with an interest, informed by psychoanalysis, in the child's entry into language too,⁵¹ this latter perhaps the most noticeable 'theme' across Manson's various works.⁵²

This entry into language is a stuttering one (cf. 'because I can't speak'), the mouth wheezing and spluttering – 'violent asthma', 'choke on gladly' – in the heat of a Pompeian cinnabar mine, lungs cut with sulphur, hands awash with quicksilver.⁵³ Rothko's painting obscures these murderous conditions of the mines in which vermilion paint finds its origin, it 'drapes' the 'fit' in 'cinnabar'.⁵⁴ However, Manson's poem critically reclaims this history in order to explore the relations between the

'finished' artefact and the material conditions of the labour it effaces. In 'Four Darks in Red' we find a language surface that refuses to obscure the conditions of its production and an account, embedded in the materiality of the language, of a kind of continual, stuttering attempt to reacquire language in an encounter with its material basis, underpinned by the physical activation of the poem in the vocal apparatus. Manson's extraordinary long sequence 'Sourdough Mutation' insists on this consistent return of language to the biological body, stating in its epigraph that *'The audience imagined for this is of speakers reading'*.⁵⁵

Manson's refusal to mystify the undeniable obstacles poetic language poses to communication, and his poems' corresponding withdrawal from direct communication, could become, in the particular ways in which he conceives and constructs the 'language surface', the basis of a poetics of candour. A poetics foregrounding candour must recognise the enclosing logic of the will to direct communication in poetry, in which 'writer' and 'reader' are consolidated in the false assertion of a dialogic relationship. Crucially, it must also recognise that in poetic language, because direct communication cannot achieve what it seeks to, there can be no candour without simultaneous concealment, or alternatively, that candour cannot avoid the non-communicative. Correspondingly, poetic language is the site where concealment's dependence on the social is most legible: secrets demand interlocutors (from whom the secret is kept) and, when shared, inaugurate social configurations. Manson's poems are artefacts designed to solicit encounters with our shared material basis, a praxis of readership in which the writer relinquishes their privileged position; an appropriate place, in its universality, to begin thinking about poetic candour which avoids 'emo[ting] at a brick wall'.

Notes

¹ Peter Manson (1969–) is a Scottish poet and translator of poetry, especially Stéphane Mallarmé. Manson's translation of Mallarmé's *Poesies* was published as *The Poems in Verse* in 2012 by Miami University Press. Manson's most well-known book is a prose work called *Adjunct: an Undigest*, first published in 2001 on ubuweb, and subsequently by Edinburgh Review and Barque Press. He is also the author of several collections of poetry including *For the Good of Liars* (2006), *Between Cup and Lip* (2008), *Poems of Frank Rupture* (2014) and most recently *Factitious Airs* (2016). With Robin Purves he edited the poetry journal *Object Permanence* between 1994 and 1997.

² Peter Manson, 'Let it Be', in *Northwords* 31, Spring 2003, pp. 33–34, p. 33.

- ³ 'Asymptote', OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/12356>> [accessed 29 April 2016].
- ⁴ Peter Manson, 'Let it Be', p. 33.
- ⁵ The various ways in which Manson conceives the disjunction between writing and speech have not yet been made clear in scholarship, but Stéphane Mallarmé's critical prose seems as good a place to begin thinking about these questions as any, given Manson's quarter-century engagement with Mallarmé's works (including of course Manson's translation of Mallarmé's *Poesies*, which appeared as *The Poems in Verse* in 2012, from Miami University Press, and his recent translation of *The Marrying of Hérodiade*, in *Free Poetry*, Vol 10, No. 1, February 2016). See Mallarmé's 'The Mystery in Letters', for example: 'If anyone, surprised by its wingspan, looks for something to blame... it's just Language, playing. –Words, all by themselves, light each other up on the sides that are known as the rarest and most meaningful only for the spirit, the centre of vibratory suspense; whoever perceives them independent of the usual context, projected onto cave walls so long as their mobility or principle lasts, being what is not said in speech: all eager, before they are extinguished, to exchange a reciprocity of flames, or presented obliquely as contingency.' Stéphane Mallarmé, 'The Mystery in Letters', in *Divagations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 231–236, p. 235.
- ⁶ Cf. Manson's poem 'Sonnet': 'Obviously, yes:/one hand claps the asymptote to death/and the echo tunnels to a complex place'. A speculative reading of these lines might privilege the fact that sound, however tenuous (one hand's clap) kills the asymptote, and its echo tunnels outwards. The reader follows the sonic traces of concealment: one hand clapping is a figure of enclosure, producing a relatively timid sound as the hand, rather than greeting or sharing, folds in on itself. Peter Manson, 'Sonnet', *International Literary Quarterly*, 2010. <http://interlit.org/glasgowvoices/peter_manson/job.php> [accessed 26 October 2016].
- ⁷ Those interested in the self-reflexive nature of Manson's early experiments with formal constraints should seek out Ellen Dillon's paper 'The weight of matter is dissolved': Towards Lightness in Peter Manson's 'Canzon – (for singing) – after Calvacanti' <https://www.academia.edu/18098293/_The_weight_of_matter_is_dissolved_working_towards_lightness_in_Peter_Manson_s_Canzon_for_singing_after_Cavalcanti> [accessed 26 October 2016].
- ⁸ Peter Manson, and Tim Allen, 'Hold that Golem', in *Don't Start Me Talking* (London: Salt Publishing, 2007), p. 282. Cf. Mallarmé on the practice of reading in the concluding lines of 'The Mystery in Letters': 'It is a virginity which solitarily, before the transparency of an adequate look, divides all by itself into fragments of candor, nuptial proofs of the Idea.', in *Divagations*, p. 236.
- ⁹ '*au secret*' means 'in secret' but also 'in solitary confinement' in French. See, Adam Kotsko's gloss on the title of Derrida's *Literature in Secret*, in Jacques Derrida, *Literature in Secret: An Impossible Filiation*, trans. Adam Kotsko, <<https://itself.files.wordpress.com/2007/01/derrida-literature-in-secret.pdf>> [accessed 24 August 2017].
- ¹⁰ 'Secret' comes from the Latin *secernere*, 'to separate, divide off'. See 'secret, adj. and n.', OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/174537> [accessed 24 August 2017].
- ¹¹ I have in mind two excellent papers on Anna Mendelssohn presented at the Secret Poetry symposium (hosted by Northumbria University, April 2016) by Jordan Savage ('The Secret Lyric in Anna Mendelssohn's *Impacable Art*') and Vicky Sparrow ('[A] poet must know more/than a surface suggests': Anna Mendelssohn and Poetic Concealment').
- ¹² These dynamics, carried by the language surface, are of course where this paper intervenes in the questions of 'secret poetry', the theme of this issue of *The Journal of British and Irish Innovative*

Poetry. Manson's poetry recognises that the potential for 'public' disclosure is crucial to the logic of the 'private' secret, an act of wilful concealing which depends on the social configuration from which the information is kept or 'set aside'. More, secrets are shared as a means of inaugurating social groups based on trust. Secrecy is a condition of poetic language due to the latter's ambiguity and its materiality. Poetic language obfuscates and withholds the straightforwardly communicative. Manson's poetry, in recognising and committing to these fundamental conditions of language, counter-intuitively is far more capable of 'disclosure', as sharing, than poetries that might seek this result through direct communication.

- ¹³ '[T]he important point', Lacan writes, 'is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical synthesis by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality.' Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage' in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982), pp. 1–7, p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Peter Manson, 'Lancer's Gap', in *For the Good of Liars*, (London: Barque Press, 2006), p. 21.
- ¹⁵ Peter Manson, 'raven A', in *Factitious Airts* (Leeds: Zarf Editions, 2016), pp. 8–9.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Aughey, 'Completely and Verifiably Beyond Use', *Observer*, 7 May, 2000 <<http://www.theguardian.com/observer/comment/story/0,6903,218125,00.html>> [accessed 26 October 2016].
- ¹⁷ Peter Manson, 'raven A'.
- ¹⁸ In recent correspondence, Manson revealed that the poem's title 'raven A' comes from his memory of an advert for the cigarette brand 'Craven A'. Manson's speaker's overt pessimism here when it comes to the possibility of communication is observable in more latent modes across Manson's works, and is anticipated, especially, in the stuttering, choking mouth I'll look at later in 'Four Darks in Red'. The field established by '[C]raven A', 'raven', 'I cannot speak' and 'if I could caw' suggests a similar preoccupation with stuttering and choking, or the imperative to continue speaking in spite of its being 'placed completely and verifiably beyond use'.
- ¹⁹ Peter Manson, 'raven A'.
- ²⁰ Peter Manson, 'raven A'.
- ²¹ See Manson's 'A note on serial poetry', in *For the Good of Liars*, p. 41, which describes the emergence and dissolution of a writing process influenced by Arnold Schönberg's serial music: 'My accent of spoken English (I come from Glasgow)', Manson writes, 'has twelve vowel and diphthong phonemes, and the poems are written in groups of twelve words, with each of these twelve phonemes being represented exactly once in the main stressed syllable of a word in each group. No regard is paid to sentence stress, or to vowels in the unstressed syllables of polysyllabic words.' Though the experiment ceases quickly ('I abandoned the procedure after writing down the following sequence of words, quite without plan – "Hear now voice echoes of your face going transparent in buttercup light" – and discovering it to be serial'), Manson is often candid about his commitment to writing poems in which each line compels the tongue to a full guided tour of the mouth.
- ²² Peter Manson, *Adjunct: an Undigest* (London: Barque Press, 2009), p. 52.
- ²³ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 285. This quotation reads strangely, and it's tempting to assume that 'upset' is a misprint of 'upsetting'. Having said that, the passage from which the quotation is taken discusses the relief granted by pulling personal material up into one language surface, or subsuming a particular kind of declarative language under the rules of a formal space that foregrounds amusing disjunctions between different kinds of language rather than the ostensible contents specific to each of them. So, 'upset' does achieve some force.

- ²⁴ Peter Manson, 'Love Poetry' in *Between Cup and Lip* (Miami: The Miami University Press, 2009), p. 54.
- ²⁵ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, pp. 280–281.
- ²⁶ Craig Dworkin, 'Poetry Without Organs', in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945–2007*, eds. Robin Purves & Sam Ladkin (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), pp. 168–193, pp. 171–2.
- ²⁷ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 284.
- ²⁸ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 284.
- ²⁹ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 281.
- ³⁰ Peter Manson, *Adjunct*, p. 64. This fragment also points towards the relief offered by facetious humour in Manson's poetry. Manson is candid about the personal importance of this humour in his interview with Tim Allen, but humour's importance to his poetics at large has also been expanded on at length most notably by Jeremy Noel-Tod. See Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Not Joking Exactly: Peter Manson and the Poetry of Crudity', in *Chicago Review* Vol. 53, No. 1, (Spring 2007), pp. 116–125.
- ³¹ See Robin Purves 'A Distraction during Peter Manson': 'The fact that these poems end up reflecting back (to) a self, the name and the body precariously identified with an author (*pron.* 'other'), can't help but associate itself with the many mirrors which act as gaze, screen and page throughout his work...' <https://www.academia.edu/13074799/A_Distraction_during_Peter_Manson> [accessed 26 October 2016].
- ³² Further work on this understanding of the writing process and its relation to the self might begin by returning to Kristeva. See, for example, Sanja Bahun, on Kristeva's 'hypersign', in *Modernism and Melancholy: Writing as Countermourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 8: 'As a fetish, the work of art emerges only when – and at the exact moment when – the activating sorrow has been repudiated. Yet this slippage from emotion into action does not repress, or cancel, the melancholic affect itself. Rather, it suggests a sublimatory hold over absence without obliterating the lost object. As the artist weaves "a hypersign around and with the depressive void", the imprints of loss become visible to a careful reader.'
- ³³ Peter Manson, 'Dreaming, at Length, of the Rood', in *Toward. Some. Air.*, eds. Amy De'Ath and Fred Wah (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2015), pp. 221–223, p. 221.
- ³⁴ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, p. 282.
- ³⁵ See Jan Abram writing on 'transitional objects' in *The Language of Winnicott: a Dictionary of Winnicott's Use of Words*, (London: Karnac, 1996), p. 338: 'Before 1951, when Winnicott presented his seminal paper, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", there was no accounting for the place between inside and outside in the psychoanalytic literature.'
- ³⁶ Peter Manson, 'Let it Be'.
- ³⁷ Peter Manson and Tim Allen, *Don't Start Me Talking*, p. 284.
- ³⁸ Presented at the University of Glasgow's Outside In/Inside Out Poetry Festival, October 2016.
- ³⁹ Peter Manson, 'Four Darks in Red', in *For the Good of Liars*, p. 17.
- ⁴⁰ Introducing his poem 'Bolus of Rhubarb and Mercury' in a recording from the 9th of May, 2005, at Queens' College, Cambridge, Manson claims he wrote it after somebody remarked to him that 'the largest source of environmental mercury is actually the cremation of people with amalgam fillings'. See 'Peter Manson Reading at Queens' (03.40) hosted by Archive of the Now. <<https://www.archiveofthenow.org/authors/?i=59>> [accessed 23 January 2018]. The preoccupation with cinnabar (mercury sulphide) alongside dentistry in 'Four Darks in Red' riffs on the same theme. The 'maquette' in 'Four Darks in Red', then, could be read as an amalgam filling (a maquette of a tooth), having loosened and fallen out, being held up to the morning sunlight ('yolk-bound solution' – sun as yolk sac). The 'deep-rooted sleep problem', or tooth-ache, we might assume, is solved facetiously

in the poem by the sunrise which ends the period with which it's tempting (but ignorant perhaps) to associate the effects of insomnia. 'Headlamp' to 'fit draped in cinnabar/moth that you choke on gladly' can also be read as a rather gory image of dental work on the damaged tooth.

⁴¹ Peter Manson, *Between Cup and Lip*, p. 51. Cf. 'And it seemed to me you lived your life/like a candle in the wind/never fading with the sunset/when the rain set in'.

⁴² Manson was present when the conference presentation version of this paper was read at the University of Northumbria's Secret Poetry conference. He emphasized the porosity of the gaps between words too, claiming that, when reading 'The pain is near celibate', he reads 'The penis near celibate'.

⁴³ Cf. *Between Cup and Lip*, the title of Manson's only US-published poetry collection to date. The title invites the reader to think of the sonic connection between 'cup' and 'lip' as their phonemes are voiced, the visual connection bound to their sharing of three letters and the final 'p', as well as the image of a meeting of lips – cup and/or human.

⁴⁴ See 'I', in Peter Manson, *For the Good of Liars*, p. 59.

⁴⁵ Peter Manson, 'A Funeral in Sense', in *For the Good of Liars*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ See Peter Manson, *me generation* (London: Writers Forum, 1997), unpagged, p. 16. <<https://petermanson.wordpress.com/poems/me-generation/>> [accessed 26 October 2016].

⁴⁷ See 'A note on serial poetry' in Peter Manson, *For the Good of Liars*, p. 41.

⁴⁸ See Greg Thomas's review of *Poems of Frank Rupture* in *HIX EROS*, VOL. 6, pp. 55–60, and Ellen Dillon's forthcoming work on 'Sourdough Mutation' in "A poetry at the gates of existence": negotiating (with) the outside in some work by Peter Gizzi and Peter Manson', presented at the University of Glasgow's Outside In/Inside Out Poetry Festival, October 2016.

⁴⁹ 'effort', OED Online. September 2016. Oxford University Press. <<http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/59793> [accessed 29 April 2016].

⁵⁰ Robin Purves, 'A Distraction after Peter Manson'.

⁵¹ See Robin Purves, 'A Distraction after Peter Manson': "The Baffle Stage"... towards its end directly announces a persistent association, made more obliquely in his work for more than twenty years on and off, between [Manson's] father's death when Peter was eleven months old... and Peter's first stirrings into speech, and it does so to usher in a fantastic answer to the conundrum of how a blind infant might assume its *je-idéal* given the seeming indispensability of sight to Lacan's theory of "the mirror stage".

⁵² These ideas are everywhere across Manson's oeuvre, though they're explored most explicitly in 'The Baffle Stage', collected in *Poems of Frank Rupture*: 'the poem's father died when it was one/the poem was acquiring language then/the system with no positive terms won/from rack to lack to cack and back again'. Peter Manson, 'The Baffle Stage' in *Poems of Frank Rupture*, pp. 2–8, p. 6.

⁵³ Cf. 'In mining either by shaft or by gallery, barriers of silex are met with, which have to be driven asunder by the aid of fire and vinegar; or more frequently, as this method fills the galleries with suffocating vapours and smoke, to be broken to pieces with bruising-machines shod with pieces of iron weighing one hundred and fifty pounds; which done, the fragments are carried pout on the workmen's shoulders, night and day, each man passing them on to his neighbour in the dark, it being only those in the pit's mouth that ever seen the light.' Pliny, *The Natural History*, Book XXXIII, chapter 21, p. 101, in Celia Davenport Harris, 'Cinnabar: The Symbolic, Seductive, Sublethal Shade of Pompeii', <<http://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/30594?show=full>> [accessed 26 October 2016].

⁵⁴ Celia Davenport Harris advances the thesis that Rothko's visit to Pompeii in 1959, shortly after 'Four

Darks in Red' (1958) was to become a constitutive influence on his later work. Harris argues for the importance of the distinctive reds found in the ancient friezes from The Villa of the Mysteries outside Pompeii to Rothko's Seagram panels. See Celia Davenport Harris, 'Cinnabar: The Symbolic, Seductive, Sublethal Shade of Pompeii', chapter 3.

⁵⁵ Peter Manson, 'Sourdough Mutation', in *Poems of Frank Rupture* (Brighton: SANCHO PANZA, 2010), pp. 9–95, p. 9.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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