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## ARTICLE

# Peter Manson Fungus Chicken

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This essay follows a number of interwoven threads through a range of different kinds of writing by Peter Manson over a span of twenty years, from the image-poem 'Fungus Chicken', published by Writers Forum in 1997 to work from the recent booklet, *Factitious Airs* (Zarf Editions, 2016). It seeks to demonstrate the existence of some fundamental and intimate links between each of the following key concepts: the name, the image, negation, replacement, love, death, speech, silence, the writing subject and the family. In addition, the essay analyses the significance for his work of the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances to facilitate the recovery of scenes from early childhood related to the death of a parent.

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**Keywords:** Peter Manson; Fungus Chicken; mushroom; psilocybin; name; father; mother; negation; cuddly toys

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Peter Manson's 'Fungus Chicken' is an icon and toyish chimera, composed of two separate pieces of cartoon clip art.<sup>1</sup> It first makes its appearance in *me generation*, which was published by Bob Cobbing's Writers Forum press in December 1997.<sup>2</sup> Cobbing's unique approach to the aesthetics of book production and his attachment to visual 'noise' explains why the quality of the image there differs from the much more pristine version reproduced in the volume called *Between Cup and Lip*, released by the University of Miami, Ohio in 2008 (see **Figures 1** and **2**).<sup>3</sup>

If I have more affection for the earlier version, it must be because it reminds me of the respect and admiration each had for the other at an early period in Manson's development as a poet and in the last stages of Cobbing's long and marvellous life's work. *me generation*, though, is a really strange book. Its contents include some of Manson's experiments with serial poetry of various kinds, beside image-poems (for want of a better word) and residual splatter from his algorithmic generation of fractals. There is a deliberately vandalised version of his own translation of



**Figure 1:** Image from *me generation*.



**Figure 2:** Image from *Between Cup and Lip*.

*The Seafarer*. There are also some extracts from what would later be published as *Adjunct: an Undigest*, excerpted before I think he knew what he was doing with that unclassifiable sprawl of re-housed scraps and entries and exits. There are random-seeming screen grabs; two pages are from an early draft of his poem 'Widows and Orphans'; there are fragments of poems scribbled over; and something no first book by any Scottish poet should be without, the wilful destruction of a poem by Philip Hobsbaum.<sup>4</sup> Manson would not have produced a book like this for anyone but Writers Forum; for anyone other than Bob Cobbing, that is: it seems to me to have been put together to make something that Bob would like, and something similar could be said for Manson's *first* first book, *iter ature*. It could be tempting, then, to identify 'Fungus Chicken' as a tribute to or portrait of Bob Cobbing. Cobbing was, after all, the author of 'Sumerian Hymn to the Sacred Mushroom' – which is a series of presumably Sumerian phonemes arranged in an irregular central pillar, vaguely mushroom-shaped – and he has another poem, also in the fourth volume of his *the Collected Kris Kringle*, called 'A Guide to British Philocybin [sic] Mushrooms'.<sup>5</sup> Despite the mycological connection, however, I am going to argue that 'Fungus Chicken' is not a version of Cobbing but a *self*-portrait, and a self-portrait made in a way that can provide us with an introduction to related but much more intricate and intractable features of Manson's art. The words 'Fungus Chicken', for example, can be shown to have replaced the name 'Peter Manson' while recalling the name obscurely, because it differs from the name 'Peter Manson' in a restricted fashion.

Each of the following four words are heard as trochees: Manson Fungus Chicken Peter. *Peter Manson Fungus Chicken*. Fungus Chicken is a new name: Fungus replaces Peter and Chicken replaces Manson. In Fungus and in Peter both, each word has one vowel repeated and reduced in its second iteration to make the word a trochee: *e* in Peter, *u* in Fungus. In the pronunciation of Chicken and Manson, each word is a trochee by reduction of a different vowel, from *i* to *e* in Chicken and *a* to *o* in Manson. Together, both names use the full complement of five vowels, a feature which foreshadows the later, Oulipian constraints imposed on vowel sounds in the 'serial' poems collected in *Between Cup and Lip*. The C of chicken is separated by two letters from the F in fungus in the order of the alphabet, as are the initials

of Peter Manson. Chicken ends in *-en*, Manson in *-on*. The only truly surprising revelation this essay has to offer is that the (clip-art) chicken is actually a (clip-art) owl (see **Figure 3**), and this fact clinches my argument since “Fungus Owl,” as a name, could not accommodate the reverse-transcription back to Peter Manson which I’ve sketched here.

Like the simple and even crude structure of the image- or picture-poem itself, its title can be explained as a result of the swapping of content between places to be filled. ‘Fungus Chicken’ looks like the sort of thing a child might do to two of its toys. When the body, arms and legs of my old Peter Manson wore out, I replaced them with this owl’s body and appendages; then, when the head of my old Peter Manson wore out, I replaced it with this toadstool cottage. When the names Peter and Manson wore out, I had them replaced too and now I have a whole new Peter Manson, sorry, Fungus Chicken, to play with, touch, wrestle, drool over, reject.



**Figure 3:** Clip art image used to produce ‘Fungus Chicken’.

The title, 'Fungus Chicken', bears its descriptive meaning towards the image with a straightforwardness and accuracy that isn't unheard of in Manson's work but isn't exactly his usual practice either. There is often some kind of disjunction between title and poem, and occasionally no apparent relation, and sometimes a relation which is buried or disguised. An entry in *Adjunct: an Undigest* tells us that the title (and existence) of the poem 'Nosebleed' was suggested by a Spanish friend's mishearing of another of Manson's titles, 'Rosebud'.<sup>6</sup> But what, if anything, does the title of the poem 'raven A' have to do with the mention of 'Ravenna' in the earlier poem, 'Sarin Canasta'?<sup>7</sup> And what does the title of the poem 'raven A' have to do with the poem it names? The trip of the tongue or ear from rosebud to nosebleed passes via a similar substitution of sounds to the one I've suggested takes place in getting from Peter Manson to Fungus Chicken. On the page occupied by 'Fungus Chicken', though, for perhaps the only time in Manson's published work, a combination of signifiers encounter their signified, and thereby complete the linguistic sign. One other possible example is the winsomely titled 'I like to masturbate recycling bins' in *Between Cup and Lip*, but the title there is a full re-interpretation of the image, not just its christening or confirmation.<sup>8</sup> As a one-off, then, part of the gratification provided by 'Fungus Chicken' is this idiotically direct correspondence, a blatantly stupid statement of the obvious, inside a context where avoidance of the customary has always been the rule rather than the exception.

'Fungus Chicken' might be an image-poem; it is not an Imagist poem. But, like Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro', it consists of two juxtaposed parts or images plus a title. We might imagine, then, the borderline between head and body as an interstice marking where the lower image emerges from the upper, just as the twig in 'In a Station of the Metro' is tugged, petals first, from Pound's colon. If we were to interpret the lower part of the image as the production of the upper part, we could surmise that the feathered body is a hallucination produced from the head consumed by the magic mushroom – but the toadstool cottage head-unit is only super-imposed, in the most rudimentary way, over the owl-half: it is not hovering above it as its origin. This is an imago which advertises the division of the subject in a way that the human body-image does not. We could stop here to remind ourselves that the cover image of *Adjunct: an Undigest* is a quite coarse overlay of a photograph

of Manson's face onto that of La Gioconda and the picture on the cover of *Poems of Frank Rupture* superimposes part of the face of the English actor Jim Broadbent onto the head of Charles Baudelaire. In the most general of terms, the process celebrates the positive value of replacement, that things can go in the so-called 'wrong' place and acquire or invent a new sense of rightness about them, and this seems somehow fundamental to what Manson does not just in terms of the design of visuals but in his poetry and his prose work too.

We can identify the real mushroom which is the model for the clipart image. It is *Amanita muscaria*, the more or less classic image of a mushroom or toadstool with its bright red cap and white volva scales. It is otherwise known as *Fly agaric*, and found more often sheltering under tree cover than it is in delicate symbiosis with a cartoon chicken (or owl). While some species of the *Amanita* genus are poisonous – most infamously, *Amanita phalloides* or the death cap – *Amanita muscaria* is hallucinogenic.

Now, a *headless* chicken is a byword for rash and uncontrolled movement but 'Fungus Chicken' is a sedate and unitary image, if not necessarily a coherent one. It is *not* a headless chicken; its head has been replaced. The short-lived frenzy of a headless version has been avoided by the imposition of some kind of pilot, a clearly domesticated version of the hallucinatory 'logic' of the magic mushroom, one you might comfortably live inside. Considered *as* a head, it is difficult to locate a focussed gaze coming from the toadstool cottage, and this is appropriate, given the considerable reduction in normal focus and vigilance which magic mushrooms tend to produce in the subject who takes them.

Manson hasn't taken fly agaric mushrooms – not yet, anyway. He has, however, had experiences with LSD, psilocybin mushrooms and *Salvia divinorum* which have informed his writing, and one aim of this essay is to discuss the nature of that influence and how it operates in his work. This has tended to take the form of attempts at an introspective exploration, involving the reception of recovered memory-images and memory-sounds; in particular, repeated efforts at trying to listen again to his earliest environment through his own infant eyes, and to look at it through his own infant ears. For Manson, I believe, psychotropic substances meet the needs of a pre-existing

motive to self-examine by introducing a new capacity for it. Before we get to the attributes of his writing connected to these substances and this motive, I want to introduce another thread to this analysis.

This feature is the remarkable frequency with which the negating particles 'not' and 'no' crop up, especially in the booklet *Birth Windows*, published by Barque in 1999. 'Gray Squirrel' has 'as in idiot not idea' and 'keen anvil, not ceiling'. From the poem 'Hats', 'Places a face previously was not', 'Breath, in itself not nothing, no speech', 'the polyp with no face', and 'Not to walk'. 'Widows and Orphans' contains the phrase 'to no end' and 'Four Darks in Red' has 'not that I died' while 'In Vitro' has 'not my mother's, no lover of hers –/– never with this Chimera,/me' and 'no wine'. The feature is most insistent in 'Lancer's Gap' with its 'no specific skill', 'No solid reason', 'no horse/ballast', 'no paradise off', 'no site of ochre', 'no border' and 'there is no mail-drop here on the ribbed beeswax candle'.<sup>9</sup> The same kind of formulae emerge now and again in later poems such as 'Depressions Gone From Me Blues' with its "the status of no land" and 'Familiars, for Maggie Graham':<sup>10</sup> "in the nowhere," "the brain does not patch over," "not the blind spot/no cat ever leapt out of" and "you would wish on no-one." There are many further examples I could cite from other poems, such as "Neither Waving Nor Drowning" and "Dow Hill" but perhaps the ultimate expression of this phenomenon is the boxed off call-and-response in *Adjunct:an Undigest*:<sup>11</sup>

Peter: The fact. Then overwhelming no.
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What, if anything, might justify or explain this not- or no- procedure, where negation works to dissipate the weight of any thing just proposed, without of course managing completely to delete the noun's compromised assertion? The meanings of the poems, as far as they can be divined, have to be wrapped up somehow with



this apparent compulsion to undo and it might be possible to intuit a connection between this and the art of replacement at work in 'Fungus Chicken', though it will take some further efforts at description and exploration to say why.

I have written elsewhere about the association Manson feels compelled to make, even against his own better judgment, between the death of his father (also named Peter Manson) when the poet was eleven months old, and his contemporaneous acquisition of language.<sup>12</sup> The poem "falling awake", from the recent booklet, *Factitious Airs*, incorporates the lines:

who else disappears  
in the death that a name is

I wish I could not echo  
but it brings a thumb to my mouth  
and a toy  
speaking out of this infancy  
as you know I am<sup>13</sup>

Many more examples from his work could be gathered here, linking death, the name and speech, but this quotation is one of the more direct in introducing the idea that a dead father you never knew is not much more than a name; a name read as a spell which kills the person who inherits it by reducing him to a reverberation or repetition of the deceased.

There are numerous efforts across the work to re-iterate the name and in doing so to re-ambiguate it, to try and divest it of its indexical function. Perhaps each new encounter with the proper name in Manson's work might aspire even to the function of the not- or no- formula in this respect, the name's early, partial erasure by the title 'Fungus Chicken' being one example of how this works.<sup>14</sup> The liberating act of re-naming could stand for the promise of a new subjective and intersubjective dimension which does not echo that of a departed other. We could go on to construct a precarious and almost impressive argument joining his Mallarmé translations

with the themes of premature bereavement, the name and language acquisition, given the interest his own commentaries on Mallarmé display in just these factors. His beautiful short article in the *Enclave Review*, 'Girl born without a mother: the posthumous Mallarmé', begins with Mallarmé's own death and the death of Mallarmé's young son, Anatole. It then meditates briefly on the fact that Hérodiade, the protagonist of a poem begun by Mallarmé in his early twenties and taken up again towards the end of his life after a break of around thirty years, is said to share her name with her mother, and the essay concludes with an evocative paragraph concerning the French poet's inauthentic reaction to the death of his own mother when he was five. On the shared name, he writes: 'The very naming of Hérodiade, daughter of Hérodiade, seems to minimise the possibilities of motherhood in favour of something more like cloning'.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, lashing someone to the matronym – as Manson is tied to the patronym – could be interpreted as indelibly underlining the maternal connection. A note to his translation of Mallarmé's poem 'Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade' makes the same point about the name in order to demonstrate how its duplication 'emphasise[s]...Hérodiade's flight from sex'<sup>16</sup> though two pages later in the Scholia he mentions 'the incestuous overtones of the biblical story of Salome/Hérodias and Herod'.<sup>17</sup> This reminds us that she is not just named after her father's sexual partner, she is also named after her father, and these facts might be said to connect her to sex more than they allow her to fly from it. *Hérodiade* sounds, in fact, like the name of a *poem* about Herod. Would it be too much to ask if there might be an obscure motive here for overlooking the name of the father which haunts the name of his own offspring? The article ends in a poetic suggestion with respect to Hérodiade where Manson toys with but eventually dismisses the notion that Hérodiade's nurse's decades-long tarrying at the threshold in Mallarmé's poem could be explained by his reluctance to have the almost-mother depart (again). Manson stages the simulacrum of a reading which generates pathos and interest, and then recognises its speculative dubiety ("sometimes a nurse is just a nurse"). The last line withdraws, perhaps almost negates, the reading but leaves its vestigial affect to resound in the subsequent silence.

I would like to turn now to a short poem in prose from *Between Cup and Lip* called “In the beginning...” in the hope of bringing together the themes of hallucination, parent-child relations, and the toy as replacement object.

‘In the beginning...’

In the beginning, which must be placed some months after birth, the child makes no distinctions among his experience of his own body, of the world containing it, and of the language which contains both. What I recover from this period is an endless unbroken monologue, many of whose terms are words, others representing the act of pointing at or presenting objects or concepts such as direction in space. The monologue seems entirely centered on the child, partly generated by it and partly directed towards it. Most of the content is concerned with the functioning of the child’s body, with breathing, eating, farting, defecating, and the tone is one of protective introduction, warning the child of what its body is about to do, walking it through the process and making sure it isn’t upset afterwards. The voice sounds more like my own than anyone else’s, but there is no clear visual image of a speaker. Instead, the monologue is associated with, almost lip-synched by, an assemblage of friendly animals, toy-like and animated, with long, inquisitive snouts like badgers or hedgehogs. The atmosphere is so completely unthreatening, so infused with the joy of uncontested being, that I wonder, afterwards, if I noticed my father’s death at all. Next time, I make a conscious attempt to remember my mother as she was during my infancy, and recover no image, only a desperate, weeping blackness, taking comfort from my skin and protecting me from a loss I can never reach.<sup>18</sup>

Without promoting itself as such, ‘In the beginning...’ is an account of an experience under the influence of psilocybin mushrooms. What can we learn from this text which might be relevant for our themes? We have an encounter with a mixture of ‘words’ and also ‘terms’, carefully differentiated from words, ‘representing the act of pointing at or presenting objects or concepts such as direction in space’. And

we have a failure to recover images; there is 'no clear visual image of a speaker', 'no image, only a desperate, weeping blackness' in a situation of intensely confused perception, except that the monologue he hears or knows is connected to an array of transitional objects in an atmosphere 'infused with the joy of uncontested being'.

The first glimpse we are offered of Manson knowing anything, or of him imagining a first moment for the gathering of some kind of knowledge, it represents a distraction from the acknowledgement of his father's death. He is only aware that he is in a benign Mexican stand-off with a cordon of friendly animals, set before him to play with, touch, wrestle, drool over, or reject. The end of the text tells us that he is committed to repeating the search for or invention of a trauma which he could integrate with autobiographic memory. The memory-hallucinations of the 'friendly animals' and the 'desperate, weeping blackness' alike, ought to be associated with a trauma. However, only at the second attempt does he approach something of this sort in what could be considered the appropriately grief-stricken fashion. The first experience is associated with the trauma, but joyously. We're left with a sense that no matter how doggedly he pursues the ordeal, he can never notice or reach the bereavement he feels he has to have undergone or that he needs to undergo but, on the other hand, perhaps the 'uncontested' nature of his infant joy is an admission that there *is* a direct and inappropriate-because-infantile experience of his father's death. Left in sole possession of the maternal body, the child does not yet know that the Oedipal rivalry will be contested in the domain of ownership of the name.<sup>19</sup>

Each time he makes the effort to go back in order to notice for the first time that his father is not there, he confirms that something has been put in his father's place: the transitional object, or the arms of the mother, from whose temporary absence the friendly objects are meant to distract him. Each time, he goes looking for the moment of abrupt disconnection from his father and each time he finds forms of care and comfort coming from his mother. It may be no coincidence that during the compilation of *Between Cup and Lip*, Manson begins to interview his mother about her family history, and this time the book cover has straightforward reproductions of undoctored photographs of his ancestors from his mother's side of the family. He

doesn't, for once, stretch the image grotesquely and/or slap a cartoon ostrich beak (say) over the top of it.

So, in 'In the beginning...' Manson sets off in search of his own suffering and finds only his mother's, the mother who presumably suffered for them both and protected him from direct experience of their shared bereavement. Manson's concerns when experimenting with hallucinogens appear unusually homely: he seems to be uninterested in elaborate visions of cosmic connectedness and universes simultaneously dying and being born. The answer he seems to end up with, despite himself and because of himself, is that his mother loves him and he likes cuddly toys. We could also posit that there is an implicit awareness, at the end of this work, of his mother's love for his father, in the form of her grief at his passing, a useful observation in the development of his own sense of self as it helps corroborate their shared desire for the child that emerges from their union.

The text 'Love poetry' appears seventeen pages before 'In the beginning...' in *Between Cup and Lip*, and though it has its own intrinsic interest as a stand-alone text I want now to look at how it overlaps with some of the concerns of 'In the beginning...' in unexpected ways.

#### 'Love poetry'

Love poetry. Though clearly unable by this stage to use words as instruments – no one will ever be swept off their feet by my poetry – I'm nevertheless startled to look back and find how much of the work of mine which I can still read is love poetry. Like everyone else, I tried to write love poems, and always failed. The attempt to make words represent something which was there before them – though the desire to do that might be as strong as my desire to do anything else – always felt like a falsification, either of the occasion or of the potential of the language. The earliest poem of mine which I can now read came about as follows (I had been writing for perhaps eight years before this). Over a period of weeks or months I had found myself, on several occasions, in company, in the presence of a woman I knew well

and liked. What the occasions had in common was that, for various reasons (seated too far apart in noisy pub, conversation monopolised by somebody else), we hadn't been able to talk to each other. I wasn't aware of any feeling other than mild sadness at this. One afternoon I was confined to my flat, waiting for some council electricians to arrive and fit a smoke alarm. I decided to use the time to revise a poem, and sat down at the computer with no fixed plan. Too much caffeine and (I imagine) a hangover had primed me for a strange mood, and I began to receive impressions from sensory memory of a quite different nature to any I had experienced before. Impressions, not exactly of the woman, but of the spaces we had met in, and of the physical postures of the people in those spaces (an abstraction of posture, without any image of the people holding them), and of the almost physical folding and distortion of another space created by the shifts of attention between one person and another – at one moment a clear flow of attention from A to B, then its pinching off, withheld, or its splitting in two, or joining with another flow. The impressions stayed stubbornly below the level of image (visual or other), hence the difficulty in reconstructing them here. Without my trying to describe them, but with an intense need to push my own perception beyond this strangling manifold, I obtained an image, literally beams of light directed from my eyes towards the spaces I couldn't resolve, and of the light being deflected sideways, as if by magnetic repulsion, causing the same pain in the eye-muscles as is caused by trying to focus on an object too close to the eye. Because everything I could see was seen along the axis of deflected light, the manifold was replaced by what I nevertheless “knew” to be peripheral to it, which was language. Every time I tried to settle on something which felt as if it ought to be a sensory image, it turned out to be groups of words, which didn't describe the image but which were it. This continued for two hours, at the end of which I had sixteen poems and a new smoke alarm.<sup>20</sup>

The text begins with one of Manson's regular and not quite exasperating professions of handicap, as he deploys words effortlessly as instruments in order to assert his

inability to use words as instruments, but the main point here seems to be in the embedded clause: it is inconceivable, he asserts, that a human being will fall in love with his poetry or fall in love with him because of his poetry. Nevertheless, most of the early poems which retain value for the poet are, he is surprised or alarmed to find, failed attempts to write love poetry. Now, strictly speaking, the words which a poet asks to precipitate some new sort of interaction into existence will always have been in more or less general circulation before any extra-poetic or 'real-life' encounter they are deployed to represent, but falsification and failure are said to enter the picture when words are called on to represent something which is there in front of them and they don't do justice to the occasion. Or perhaps something *about* the occasion itself occludes the power of language to do anything but to recount a banal story or express a compound of typical affects. He then begins an anecdote concerning the composition of what he calls 'the earliest poem of mine that I can now read'.

He tells us that he is distracted from a dutiful act of revision by uninvited sensory impressions related to the memory of a specific experience, one in a sequence of similar experiences, and he takes from it an unrepeatably lesson in how to write love poetry which lasts. The impressions are not so much of the woman he had wished to speak to in the pub as of the place in which they met without meeting, since any possible connection had been shorted by distance and interference from others. Actual, recognisable people are abstracted from the scene while the poses they struck are discernible as vectors, and these seem to be mixed with another dimension of vectors composed of shifts in attention between the disappeared protagonists. It is an impossible scenario to comprehend fully and to paraphrase accurately if it didn't happen to you, and possibly even if it *did* happen to you, especially as the impressions refuse to resolve themselves into an image or a sequence of images which could be described with clarity. Had they become an image, though, and if a poem had been written describing the image, we know the writing of it would lead to a falsification of the occasion or the occlusion of the potential of language. What Manson says he does instead is try to perceive beyond or behind the obstacle to any realisation

or description of an image until, he says, he 'obtained an image'. Elements of the situation are willed but the ensuing content seems not to be. He comes into the possession or enjoyment of an image as a result of his own active intervention in his condition and sees, not the resolution of the places which would not resolve themselves previously, but an image of his own seeing, his vision as an image which reveals the irresolvable places in being deflected away from them by an invisible but powerful force. 'Because everything I could see was seen along the axis of deflected light, the manifold was replaced by what I nevertheless "knew" to be peripheral to it, which was language'. Language is stationed at the perimeter of the obstacle which stops the scene resolving into images because language is what takes over when the visual image keeps refusing to exist. Each time he attempts to decide on an image, to focus his vision, he gets groups of words instead, and realises then that these in fact *are* the image, not a mere description of one.

The text he is talking about is called 'Microtome' and elsewhere he describes it as a little collection or anthology of fifteen or sixteen poems, when the published version in *For the Good of Liars* has eleven.<sup>21</sup> This whole happening is given a very terse write-up in *Adjunct: an Undigest*: 'Too much coffee; write 15 poems'.<sup>22</sup> Even if other crucial questions remain unanswered – for example, at what stage in the process did he get up and let the electricians into the flat? – we know that the avoidance of the falsification of their occasion or of the potential of the language, by being too tied to the occasion, renders these works early love poems that he can still read. But he doesn't explain how these qualify as love poems: he says that they were obliquely inspired by a unique set of unasked-for sensory impressions occurring to him under the influence of caffeine and a possible hangover, related to the recollection of being in a pub not being able to talk to a woman that he knows well and 'likes'. This is clearly not enough to make it a love poem. Is it a love poem then because it has failed to make someone fall in love with its author? And is the obliquity of the poems of 'Microtome' a way of *not* saying something to someone all over again? One of the poems collected under the title of 'Microtome', the poem which actually ends the little sequence, is entitled 'Thur Crafte' and it seems to express something about



the obdurate qualities that would need to inhere in a love poem to disqualify it from the kind of success which might render it unreadable.

Thur Crafte

hope in the constancy  
of rebuttal which is not  
in the external subject

but set up  
with care  
it does come

The perpetual 'rebuttal' is declared to be not in 'the external subject' – on what grounds, it is not clear – or not found there initially; instead it can be induced there, or induced in the experience of the one who is rebutted, when 'set up/with care'. Rebuttal emerges, perhaps, in the poetic act of trying to make a relation: there is inevitable falsification in the process of fabricating a connection, and a compensatory influx of optimism as a side-effect of the process. The poem may be a compressed statement on the topic of a tendency to meticulous self-sabotage, a tendency which is itself sabotaged by the resurgence of hope.

Why 'the external subject' and not 'object'? Because the poem is about relations between different persons and the language wants to resist their objectification? What it is talking about is exposure to the inevitable refutation of any proposal coming from the implied speaker as a prospective lover. The incessancy of the refutation is a perverted form of the fidelity you might wish for from a lover, but rebuttal is the insistence or the demonstration that a proposal was false. Reading 'Thur Crafte' with 'Love poetry', we can begin to grasp the extent to which the speaker holds himself responsible for the fact that each 'occasion' for the profession of a romantic interest is vulnerable to falsification.

When we compare 'Love poetry' to 'In the beginning...' we can see that they have some basic features in common. The vectors we hear of in 'Love poetry' sound close to the 'terms...representing the act of pointing at or presenting objects or concepts such as direction in space' that we encounter in 'In the beginning...'. In both texts there is also an inability to recover images at a moment of intensely confused perception. In both, we are told about the difficult process of translating pre-verbal urges or non-verbal vectors into language as the central figures reside in forms of temporary paralysis, passivity or fragmentation. The scene featuring an adult Peter Manson in the bar is a different version of the scene with the 'friendly animals'. In the latter, the cuddly cordon works as a captive audience for the child/poet and the experience depicted in the second is a reaction to him not being granted an audience, since the companions in the bar are not arranged around him for the poet's convenience or reassurance, for him to play with, touch, wrestle, drool over, reject. In the early scene he is *infans*, non-speaking, in the second scene he is also, tragically, non-speaking. The readable poem is an accidental side-effect of the failed attempt to see the one thing you needed to see, to say the one thing you needed to say. Failure, then, is not necessarily complete; it can be productive, just as Manson's negations cannot help but summon the sign in affecting to cancel a particular signified.

Many different formal procedures make up the technical side of Manson's writing practice, some of which he has brought to a pitch of extraordinary sophistication but which nevertheless work to facilitate quite fundamental, primary moves, such as the switching of properties or names, the juxtaposition of disparate discourses and tones, inappropriate interruptions of otherwise consistent texts, and transplantation. From his serial poems to *Adjunct: an Undigest* to "The Baffle Stage" in *Poems of Frank Rupture*, there appear pre-arranged places for material to be distributed according to prescriptions laid down in advance, places prepared in order that unpredictable connections can be made. His thought seems devoted to the potential for metamorphosis across all orders and models, where the opportunity and value for the subject who undergoes the change or for the subject who observes it is in whatever humour or freedom or awareness can be experienced in the result.

'Fungus Chicken' is an icon made possible by the fantasy that he can be reconstituted, or that he can reconstitute himself, through imaginary forms of his own body and name, and one of the attractions for Manson of serialism or Oulipian or aleatoric strategies, as well as parapraxes of all types, must be that the page- and poem-spaces allow for trial-and-error harmless acting-out of these de- and re-compositions. It is often as straightforward as realising a thing or a situation in words and then changing the words in one way or another in order to realise something else and to induce an access of pleasure and surprise.

At the end of 'The Baffle Stage' in *Poems of Frank Rupture* a blind baby is replaced by 'an image made of echoes' of sounds issuing from his own body, as he tries to locate himself in space and loses himself in a kaleidoscopic profusion of at least five other selves. This can be read as one of the latest encounters with a line-up or array of other presences in the short sequence we've been looking at. The poem ends with the phrase 'I caespitose narcissi' as the subject's preferred condition of transcendence, which involves his own cancellation as the source of his myriad selves and the principle of their order; it also occurs to me that Manson's poems are, in ways I have yet to meet in any other poet I have read, in a similar relation to the poet as the blind baby's imagos are to the blind baby, that is, it is vital that they are him and they could only come from him and also, to the same extent, they are very much not him. The difficult task of managing this delicate arrangement of intimacy and difference is delegated to the various strategies or pathways we can now list: the profusion of negations, the not-ing and the no-ing of the parts and things from which the poems are assembled, which summon those parts and things in the same gesture which insists on their irrelevance or reluctance to exist. The reticence of poems which can only affirm something if they simultaneously withdraw it, which, as I mentioned previously, reaches an early crescendo in the assembly of a principally prosodic equilibrium of heterogeneous densities he called 'Lancer's Gap', where a chain of negations riddle the text. The *inadvertent* composition of love poems which are not love poems, which are only tenuously related to the self and are barely related or unrelated to a love object or even to the occasions for love, emitted as they are from the periphery of the relation between those objects and occasions, uninvited

and presumed in advance to be unwelcome. The kind of affect met with in the switch or replacement poems like 'Fungus Chicken', involving *l'assomption jubilatoire*, to use the phrase of Jacques Lacan,<sup>23</sup> of a barely recognisable form, the simple, joyous and largely unproblematic novelty of unrelation which can effect an ecstatic release into new meanings or into non-meaning, release from the freight of the meaning of everything he inherited along with his father's name. One of the things I most associate with 'Fungus Chicken' is a memory of the author's boundless and perfectly uncomplicated delight with his own creation.

Two emails which Peter Manson sent to myself and to our mutual friend, Oscar Marletta, provide disarming evidence of his preternatural awareness of the relevance of these topics and the degree of significance which Manson attaches to them. In the first email, written to Oscar and myself on 25<sup>th</sup> August 2009 at 21:42, he interprets his own note-taking, while under the influence of *Salvia divinorum*, as an instance of aphasic regression. The nonsense he writes while liberated and constrained by hallucinogenic substances turns out to be a jammed, flummoxed and considerably dumbed-down version of aspects of his usual practice in the swapping or echoing of phonemes between proximate words, and the whole peroration culminates in the invocation of two seminal transitional objects from Manson's childhood:

I just got bored enough to eat most of the very large Salvia plant sitting on my filing-cabinet. Four large mouthfuls of leaves, each chewed for about ten minutes till I wasn't able to continue doing that. I got a quite low-level trip, with exactly the same kind of closed-eye hallucinations and named, multiple, friendly, animal-plant-bird entities I got on mushrooms, but only visible with closed eyes and rather faint, as if they were only just managing to be there at all and wanted a stronger drug as much as I did. I got that thing I always used to get on mushrooms, where there's an instantaneous feeling that you've rejoined exactly the same experience you left when the drugs wore off last time, where everything is so completely familiar that you can't figure out why you haven't remembered any of it till now. [...]

For your edification, here's what I wrote down in my French vocabulary notebook:

JORNEFRUP

GORNEFROKES

DOONSTRUP

JONES

sooty + sweep

BONAFRUP

GORNAFUX

FOOKS

BORNAFUCKS JONES

infinitely extended

infinite

laminar

plenitude

sooty and

sweep<sup>24</sup>

The second email arrived at 22:06 the same night in response to my reply to the above:

It's basically a baby trying to learn the word "cornflakes". Every fucking time. I get Snap, Crackle and Pop from the rice krispies box too. Reinterpret all my poetry with that as the primal scene. As if anyone had ever done anything else.<sup>25</sup>

References to mushrooms recur throughout Manson's writings. The longest work in *Poems of Frank Rupture*, 'Sourdough Mutation', was conceived at least in part as

an attempt to replicate in words the effect of constant permutation which strong hallucinogenic substances engender in the world of things for a consciousness under the influence. The poem also appears to refer directly to mushrooms in the following lines:

gum-loving ribbon lips  
spill no complete boletus

when first I saw  
the mushroom head

dead though I was  
I saw that my caul be tanned

and shade in the flash  
my gingko

a poet  
tattooed<sup>26</sup>

The passage contains in microcosm many of the traits examined in this essay. The 'lips/spill no complete boletus', a boletus being a capacious category of fungi which have pores rather than gills on the underside of their cap. Rather than an *incomplete* boletus, we are offered 'no complete boletus' in line with the practice of negation at work elsewhere in the corpus and what looks like the straightforward mention of a mushroom as it appears to a first person observer, is a tweaked quotation from a lyric by Damo Suzuki, the Japanese singer and lyricist with the German rock group, Can. The song, 'Mushroom', from their 1971 double album *Tago Mago*, contains the lines: 'When I saw/The mushroom head/I was born/And I was dead'.<sup>27</sup> Suzuki's words can be read as the testimony of someone who has undergone a psilocybin trip but it is impossible to hear them and not see the mushroom cloud as inescapable backdrop to Suzuki's birth less than five years after the destruction of Hiroshima and

Nagasaki by atomic bombs and this is the aspect of the lyric which seems to provide the focus for this section of 'Sourdough Mutation'. The prosthetic 'I' borrowed from Suzuki seems here to look into a mirror and see in the 'mushroom head' both its newborn self and a nuclear explosion. A caul is the membrane which surrounds a foetus before it is born, and also the name of a thin veil still visible on a mature mushroom as the white plates or deposits on the cap of certain species. Remnants of a caul can 'cap' the head of a baby at its birth and they have been considered signs of good luck in former times, but the moment of birth is the moment of a death for Suzuki and Manson alike and the figure is indelibly marked, "tanned" and "tattooed" by the absolutely powerful flare from the blast which imprints the shadow of a gingko tree on the poet's skin. That the I, as poet and mushroom, survives the force of the thermonuclear device or of the other kind of death we call being born, should not surprise us: 'When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945, it is said, the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom'.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The essay is a revised version of the plenary talk at the Peter Manson Symposium held at the University of Glasgow on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, 2017. Thank you to Ellen Dillon and Tom Betteridge for organising the symposium and inviting me to deliver the plenary. Thank you also to the anonymous reader whose accurate diagnoses and useful advice helped improve this essay.
- <sup>2</sup> Peter Manson, 'Fungus Chicken', in *me generation*, (London: Writers Forum, 1997).
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Manson, 'Fungus Chicken', in *Between Cup and Lip*, (Miami: The Miami University Press, 2008), p. 47.
- <sup>4</sup> *me generation* was not Manson's first book, it should be made clear. It was preceded by *iter ature*, (London: Writers Forum, 1995). *me generation* was merely the first book of his to have words.
- <sup>5</sup> Bob Cobbing, 'Sumerian Hymn to the Sacred Mushroom' and 'A Guide to British Philocybin Mushrooms', in *the Kollekted Kris Kringle*, volume iv, (London: anarcho press, 1979), n.p.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Fabio mishears Rosebud as Nosebleed → poem.' Peter Manson, in *Adjunct: an Undigest*, (London: Barque Press, 2009), p. 65.
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Manson, 'raven A' in *Factitious Airs*, (Glasgow: Zarf Editions, 2016), pp. 8–9. The sentence 'Ravenna is all hair.' is uttered by King Ilona in the conversation with Mrs. Tungsten Loop and Clock's Dog which makes up the poem 'Sarin Canasta' in *For the Good of Liars*, (London: Barque Press, 2006), pp. 29–30.
- <sup>8</sup> Peter Manson, *Between Cup and Lip*, p. 56.
- <sup>9</sup> Peter Manson, 'Gray Squirrel', 'Hats', 'Widows and Orphans', 'Four Darks in Red', 'In Vitro' and 'Lancer's Gap' in *Birth Windows*, (Cambridge: Barque, 1999), n.p.
- <sup>10</sup> Peter Manson, 'Depressions Gone From Me Blues' (p. 75) and 'Familiars' (p. 77) in *Between Cup and Lip*.
- <sup>11</sup> Peter Manson, *Adjunct: an Undigest*, p. 68.

- <sup>12</sup> Robin Purves, 'A Distraction during Peter Manson', written for unAmerican Activities #6 (25th May 2014) to accompany a poetry reading featuring Peter Manson and Susan Howe, taking place simultaneously in London and New York. [https://www.academia.edu/13074799/A\\_Distraction\\_during\\_Peter\\_Manson](https://www.academia.edu/13074799/A_Distraction_during_Peter_Manson).
- <sup>13</sup> Peter Manson, *Factitious Airs*, pp. 6–7.
- <sup>14</sup> The significance of the name in Manson's poetry and prose would require a long essay of its own for the topic to even be breached. It would have to consider *Adjunct: an Undigest's* inclusion of references to names similar to his own: Peter Fanson, Peter Manso, Piero Manzoni. Perhaps the 'Peter Manson' of *Adjunct: an Undigest* is the missing link between the biographer (Manso) and the conceptual artist (Manzoni). The essay would also have to take in odd but related instances such as the moment at the beginning of the prose poem 'Uncle Dave Macon' where he mispronounces the surname of the singer/musician and inches it closer to his own: 'This is one of the first of Macon's electronic recordings – it's pronounced Mason – and he works with the false archaism of the medium, bearing the rough scrape of shellac into his voice and the sound of his banjo'. Peter Manson, *Between Cup and Lip*, pp. 71–2. The mispronunciation of 'Macon' prepares the way for a more serious identification when the sound of Macon's song, 'Run, Nigger, Run' is described as emerging from Manson's own gut and the poem ends in his diagnosis of 'the deep racism of a 1970s childhood'. The hypothetical essay would also have to consider every other name in *Adjunct: an Undigest*, and most insistently each announcement of a death. The formula 'X is dead' which runs through *Adjunct: an Undigest* could be interpreted as supporting the argument in my 'A Distraction during Peter Manson' that Manson's father's death constituted an early and thorough refutation of Piaget's concept of object permanence, since they (the formula and the death) demonstrate that certain things do sometimes stop continuing to exist when no longer present to the senses; on the other hand, the 'X is dead' structure, where 'X' is always another new but familiar name, as part of the general tendency in his work for things to find themselves swapped and usurped, is also, I think, confirmation of the same concept, since the place the name (or face) of a parent once occupied might continue to exist as that place of specific occupation even if the place is subsequently populated by a new element.
- <sup>15</sup> Peter Manson, 'Girl born without a mother: the posthumous Mallarmé', in *Enclave Review* (Spring 2011), pp. 5–6.
- <sup>16</sup> Peter Manson, note on Mallarmé's 'Ouverture ancienne d'Hérodiade' in Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Poems In Verse (Poésies)*, trans. Peter Manson, (Miami: Miami University Press, 2012), p. 219.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter Manson, *The Poems In Verse (Poésies)*, pp. 211–2.
- <sup>18</sup> Peter Manson, *Between Cup and Lip*, p. 70.
- <sup>19</sup> On the Oedipal question, the least puzzling line from the poem '1943, Cat's Hands' on p. 16 of *For the Good of Liars* is 'If you dream you are fucking your mother what does that represent'. The suggestion is that even the dreamwork nods, if a dream's manifest content can openly represent a wish which should be a prime target for repression. If we take the question seriously, however, what, for the dreamer, could be a more powerful taboo than the act of maternal incest? Is it the distorted expression of a wish to be entirely responsible for your own conception, to replace and be your own father? Is it the distorted expression of the wish to be your own *dead* father, a wish to be dead? Which idea could be scandalous enough to require the performance of a transgression of the universal taboo to mask its presence?
- <sup>20</sup> Peter Manson, *Between Cup and Lip*, pp. 53–4.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter Manson, *For the Good of Liars*, pp. 24–7.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter Manson, *Adjunct: an Undigest*, p. 37.
- <sup>23</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique', *Écrits*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 93–100, p. 94.



- <sup>24</sup> Peter Manson, personal email to Oscar Marletta and Robin Purves, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2009, 21: 42.  
<sup>25</sup> Peter Manson, personal email to Robin Purves, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2009: 22: 06.  
<sup>26</sup> Peter Manson, *Poems of Frank Rupture*, p. 49.  
<sup>27</sup> Can, *Tago Mago*, United Artists, 1971, vinyl.  
<sup>28</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 3.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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