The Figure of the Shaman in Contemporary British Poetry

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In loving memory of my father

N.A.G. Mortuza

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the shamanic in poetry by exploring the work of five late modernist British poets: Iain Sinclair, Jeremy Prynne, Brian Catling, Barry MacSweeney, and Maggie O'Sullivan. These poets are committed to a radical aesthetic that questions the symbolic ordering of reality. Loosely drawing on Mircea Eliade's notion of shamanism as 'archaic techniques of ecstasy,' they transform Eliade's version of the shaman's 'elective trauma' in order to enact a critical rejection of totalitarian tools of the state and society. I have used Sinclair's idea of the 'Shamanism of Intent' to frame three of the poets (Prynne, Catling, and Sinclair) as, in Rothenberg's phrase, 'Technicians of the Sacred' in order to highlight their intention to wrest spirituality away from the confines of religion and embody it in textual practice. This process involves an investigation and enlisting of 'hidden' energies – past and present.

I have interpreted MacSweeney and O'Sullivan in terms of their attitude towards the body where it stands as a figure of the material (i.e. social and textual) and the physical (i.e. individuals). While MacSweeney shows the physical body dismembered in a double gesture which exposes the destructive force of society and at the same time evokes the scattered body of Dionysian ritual, Maggie O'Sullivan dissects the body of her text to observe its gestation (i.e. the birth of language). The process rather than the artistic product is important. Based on these criteria, I have discussed these two poets under the category of 'Technicians of the Body.'

The poets studied refrain from branding their poetic practice as shamanic, to avoid possible fetishisation and exoticisation of their chosen project. My categorisation, however, is supported by the numerous engagements with shamanic elements in their work. In a broader literary context, I discuss how contemporary uses of the shamanic relate to the English Romantic poets' selective interpretation of shamanic and bardic ideas of the poet. At the same time I argue that the contemporary poets' use of shamanic elements involves a shared critique of myth.

INTRODUCTION

OF SHAMANISM AND CONTEMPORARY POETRY

The madness has to find somewhere to run wild.
— Iain Sinclair, Lights Out for the Territory (1997, 2)

It has become quite 'fashionable' once again to talk about the shaman. As a category of the occult, figures of the shaman now enter popular imagination mainly through films and fictions: Gandalf in J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings,* Professor Dumbledore in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda in George Lucas's *Star Wars,* or the Arthurian Merlin in Hollywood productions. This list speaks of the return of the shaman. There are recent academic discussions to consider Shakespeare's Prospero, Milton's Satan, the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, or even the American rock artist Jim Morrison as shamans. There are even extreme assertions to claim that all actors are shamans because of their shape-shifting ability of assuming the other. Indeed, these extensions of the inventory suggest that the concept of the shaman has taken a long flight from Mircea Eliade's original proposition of the North Siberian priest-doctor or George Frazer's anthropological annotation.

The modern day fascination for the shaman in particular was triggered by the publication of George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) and later on by Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1964). A shaman in the strictest sense is a priest-doctor, an 'inspirational religious practitioner', found among various northern peoples of Asia. However, a similar role of shaman can be noticed in different indigenous peoples. The OED applies the term shaman to denote 'a man or a woman who is regarded as having direct access to, and influence in, the spirit world which is usually manifested during a trance and empowers them to guide souls, cure illness' (p 160). In his visionary 'flights' or in ecstatic séances, a shaman negotiates with the 'invisible aspects of reality', which he uses to understand 'the nature of human, animal, and material existence in the world' as well as to heal or guide individuals or the whole society (in Harvey p 228). A traditional shaman is expected to receive and possess

spiritual knowledge, regulate daily activities like political, medical, scientific and legal affairs, and communicate with the gods through ritual and sacrifice. However, in its popular rendition, the shaman has become a catch-all term for a grand magician, an arch wizard, a biblical prophet, a rebel, or a traditional medicine-man. A shaman now is a character from the silver-screen or play-station; a U-rated animation figure. And, last but not least, a shaman is a cult figure, a spiritual guru running workshops to give solace to the financially-solvent yet spiritually-starved and to the new age clientele seeking 'vision quests'.

The reincarnation of the figure of the shaman rises in tandem with the burgeoning interest in the occult in general. The occult, especially in visual media like TV and movies, has invaded almost all categories of audience. There is a slice of the 'occult' for everyone, for every timeslot: *Mona* is a children version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* for teenagers, which models itself after *Charmed* for grownups. In Freudian terms, this recourse to the occult can be characterised as the uncanny, 'the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (Freud,1955: 220). This suggests one can speak of a social unconscious that constantly revives the essentially 19th century gothic as in Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983). Interestingly, in the contemporary period instead of being frightful, these popular occult figures are featured as normal, rational selves, trying to solve 'supernatural' problems in 'everyday' life. Their acceptance can be tied with a desire for a release of mental power from 'an extremely repressed, repressive culture'.[1] But the appropriation of the occult category by certain contemporary poets goes beyond this psychological interpretation as it invests in issues such as ideological politics, referentiality, and representation to investigate the re-emergence of the mystical and magical aspects of the occult in a poetics that is strategically designed as shamanic. Although they share these ideas with writers of modernism, these poets come to a different conclusion about the implications of the sacred and social aspects of the occult; thus, the simultaneous growth of the occult and shaman demands a separation of the popular shamanism from the shamanic. In what follows, I shall try to understand the rationality behind such an appropriation, the ongoing dialogue between the primitive and the modern that constitutes its contemporariness, and the overall purpose of the shamanic poetics.

Historically, the occult as well as mysticism has been linked to esoteric knowledge unavailable in organised religion, and instead to what

[1] Responding to a question on the daemonic energy unleashed by films such as *Exorcist* and *Omen*, Jerome Rothenberg makes this comment. *The Riverside Interviews*, ed. Mottram E. (London, Binnacle Press, 1984), p.31.

Emmanuel Levinas calls 'Otherwise'. The relationship between the West and the occult has been oscillatory to say the least, and the alternating acceptance and rejection of the occult by the West are well reflected in its literary history. In Renaissance England, for example, the Neo-Platonists and figures like John Dee brought the 'other-wise' occult to the public attention, which found its expression in characters such as Edmund Spenser's Archimago, Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, and Shakespeare's Prospero. Arguably, the symbolic renunciation of 'rough magic' by Prospero in *The Tempest* construed the vanishing point for the literary occult (this is the same period in Europe when modern secularism was making its presence felt).[2] With visible insistence on wit and rationality in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the concurrent spread of the Enlightenment, the occult soon found itself in the underground, tossed between naïve approval and sceptical disapproval.[3] There are hints of the return of the occult in nineteenth century gothic art, but it is not until early twentieth century that the occult re-emerges in British poetry under the generic category of myth, especially through Madam Blavatsky's theosophy via W.B. Yeats and later on through Ted Hughes' poetic myth.

However, as Anthony Mellors tells us, 'until recently…historians of modernism have been loath to make the connection between esoteric thought and positive methodologies, possibly because their (well founded) association of the occult with charlatanism threatens both the cultural value and their own academic legitimacy' (2005, 2). Literary critics seemed more comfortable in emphasising the occult in modernist poetry as a figurative mode rather than as a practice. Even within the practitioners of the literary occult, when it comes to explaining their work in relation to spiritual reality and esoteric materials, poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot or Ted Hughes exude uncharacteristic fluctuations and inconsistency (of

[2] The slow death of religion (including the occult) began in and around 1600 when a 'rationalist, pragmatic, instrumental approach' was fast gaining ground. During this time, as Alan Sinfield has argued, the advancement of technology and science began to explain natural affairs without actually referring to God. At the same time, industrialization highlighted man's control over nature. Concurrently, information received from the colonies 'relativised' the European 'Imperial supremacy'. Thus the absolute validity regarding 'human origin, history, ethics, psychology and sociology' was no longer unique to religion. (1989, pp. 90-91).

[3] Occultism continued to thrive in the underground, almost as a parallel to the phenomenal growth of enlightenment. Nineteenth-century European occultism, for example, involved freemasonry and a revival of interest in Egyptian religion and theurgy. See Godwin, J. *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (NY, New York State University Press, 1994).

course there are exceptions in the like of Robert Duncan or Allen Ginsberg). In a TLS article, Craig Raine quotes a candid Ted Hughes who told BBC Radio 3 that the Pikes in one of his earlier poems were modelled after 'angels hanging in the aura of the Creator' analogous to Blake's Tiger. "But I cut them ['mythical things'] out and left myself with the old South Yorkshire fish," Hughes candidly remarks. Doubtfulness like this leads Timothy Materer to argue in his *Modernist Alchemy* that certain occultist writers like T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, H.D., Sylvia Plath, and Ted Hughes 'suspend neither belief nor disbelief but believe in order to create' (1995, 2).

A similar complacency informs the popular interests in the occult, which according to Theodor Adorno allows it to become 'institutionalised, objectified and, to a large extent, socialized' (2004, 48). In his 'Theses on Occultism,' Adorno finds the reception of 'secondary superstitions' like the predictions of fortune-tellers or horoscopes featured in daily newspapers more problematic than occult experiences like witnessing of ghosts or telepathy studied by psychologists as an event of the unconscious or the uncanny. Adorno seems to conform with what Mircea Eliade observed in 1976: 'at least 5 million Americans plan their lives according to astrological predictions, and some 1200 of the 1750 daily newspapers in this country publish horoscopes' (1976, 59). For Adorno, the unquestioning acceptance of the occult is symptomatic of the artificial lifestyle in a highly consumerist culture and alienation in a capitalist society that has made us susceptible to these rather 'ubiquitous stimuli': we entertain, and are entertained by, these supposed iconic occult figures from the margin simply because they correspond to our psychological demands without requiring much reflection (2004, p. 51). Adorno contends:

> The tendency to occultism is a symptom of the regression in consciousness. This has lost power to think the unconditional and to endure the conditional. Instead of defining both, in their unity and difference, by conceptual labour, it mixes them indiscriminately. The unconditional becomes fact, the conditional an immediate essence. Monotheism is decomposing into a second mythology. (p. 172)

The re-emergence of the occult insinuates a degradation of both the sacred and the social. The implication of the occult, when mediated through its totality, goes beyond its conspicuous niche in the culture industry, and lends an insight into the different tactics of ideological representation and repression. The movie version of the occult, Adorno writes along with his colleague Horkheimer, represents an illusory state in which 'real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies' (1972, p.

126). Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the impact of the animation film *Donald Duck* expands this idea further. In their view, the Walt Disney production of the adorable talking duck has not only asserted technological supremacy over fantasy but also inculcated a sense of 'organised cruelty' in the mass (p.110). On the surface, this may appear as a rather extreme view, laden with personal bitterness over the holocaust. Nevertheless, when we see the random shootings in American high schools today, which can be attributed to video games or violent films, the observation of the Jewish immigrant scholars from the Frankfurt School appears valid. By the same token, the idolisation of the occult figure, like that of a wizard or a shaman from an apparently remote, therefore 'safe', past can no longer be granted license to take control of mass consciousness.

According to Adorno, the passive consumption of the occult involves a lack of conceptual labour that can make an individual vulnerable to the irrationality imposed by different institutions: it simply allows authoritarian aspects of irrationality to grow even within the self-proclaimed enlightened rationality of modernity (an idea that he elaborated with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Adorno posits:

> Late bourgeois ideology has again made it what it was for pre-animism, a being-in-itself modelled on the social division of labour, on the split between manual and intellectual labour, on the planned domination over the former. In the concept of mind-in-itself, consciousness has ontologically justified and perpetuated privilege by making it independent of the social principle by which it is constituted. Such ideology explodes in occultism. (2004, p.51)

Earlier, these critics from Frankfurt School identified enlightenment as 'mythical fear radicalised,' in which they detected a pattern of domination: the domination of nature by human beings, domination of human nature, and domination of some humans by others (1972, p. 11). In his later essay, Adorno expands two repressive aspects of ideology. Firstly, it promotes a sense of conformity and submissiveness in the masses which is fermented by overwhelming production of commodities: 'The impotence and the pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them' (2004, pp. xiv-xv). Secondly, it manipulates public opinion so that 'thought inevitably becomes a commodity and language the means of promoting the commodity' (28). Consequently, a mystified notion of immediate correspondence between word and thing is interpellated in

order to form a systematic social illusion about reality (i.e. myth), and art is presented as a fetish-object for leisurely consumption.[4]

In the make-belief world of the occult, to take another example of a movie, in the latest Harry Potter film, *The Order of the Phoenix,* the wonder-boy-wizard and his friends get involved in the bureaucratic tussle between the Headmaster and the Ministry of Magic, but have to leave the civil disobedience back in Hogwarts School of Magic. The whole mythic experience in Rowling is designed for entertainment, and the readers are fed solved riddles with supposed rationality that mystifies the relationship between the real and the magic, between 'the conditional' and 'the unconditional.' Put simply, Rowling has commodified magic for leisurely consumption. In addition, she is following the transcendental formula of high-modernism in which myth is deployed to erupt into meaning at a given epiphanic moment. This merely gives the reader/audience an impression of control over meaning, which is not really there. This is the kind of regression of consciousness that Adorno finds problematic. Adorno's project thus involves countering the 'total personality set-up' of the subjects of false-consciousness, and ultimately rescuing them from further exploitation by authoritarian forces like that of the fascists who feed on the conformist attitude of the mass. A total transformation of society is needed to redress the consciousness of the masses affected by the representation and repression of the 'secondary superstitions.' Adorno's own solution to this situation involves a 'psychiatric as well as socio-psychological' response (2004, p. 51). In order for art to be effective, Adorno in his *Aesthetic Theory* proposes the forging of 'a fetish against commodity fetishism' (1997, p.227).

Following the same logic, certain radical artists find it necessary to use occult elements like that of shamanism, rather the sublime form of superstition, to critique the dominance of instrumental reason, which does not exclude myth; on the contrary, as Adorno and Horkheimer have put it, 'myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology' (1972, p. xviii). These radical poets are aware of the danger of divorcing the occult from its aesthetic practice as it will leave the problems of psycho-social consciousness in history unattended. A return to the past, at the same time, cannot be a return to the pre-modern that the neo-Romantics pursued in the mid-twentieth century. They are equally aware of the danger of remythologising the present as a cover-up by making use

[4] Antonin Artaud's comment is pertinent here: 'If confusion is the sign of times…I see at the roots of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation.' Quoted in Taussig, (1987, p.5)

of the transcendental vision that was promoted by writers of high modernism. I shall return to both these ideas in Chapter 1. As a strategy, these radical poets propose a recategorisation of mythic rationality that would ultimately become a step towards demythologisation. In other words, contemporary radical poets engage with mythic categories used by writers of modernism, but arrive at opposite conclusions about the nature and scope of myth. Broadly speaking, this attitude towards 'myth' distinguishes these poets from the voguish postmodernists, and situates them as late-modernists in the sense of continuing critically the project of modernism.

Unlike postmodernism, a period-term that fails to recognise the relevance of modernity in present time, these poets do not declare modernism dead, but attempt to heal it by injecting entropic energy that has traditionally been considered marginal. Like the avant-gardists before them, these poets resist the idea that art can be 'owned by the bourgeoisie or shown in bourgeoisie institutions', as a means to 'temporary escape the material constraints and contradictions of everyday life' (Hopkins 2004 p. 2). They distinguish themselves from high modernism by not compromising their commitment to art in favour of cheap popularity; they demonstrated a deeper social and political commitment to critique as well as a sharper strategic representation to expose the social mores and political conventions. Late-modernist poetics is essentially curative, and is in search of an alternative mode of expression. They avoid the postmodernist fiddling with popular taste with its use of pastiche, collage, or ironies, and its embedded nihilism that does not envisage any social change. Anthony Mellors brilliantly sums up the project of late-modernism:

> The late modernist poets …write on the brink of the postmodernist abyss. Distinct, if not entirely separate from mid- to late twentieth-century poetries which are indebted to modernism but which return to highly, individualised, bardic modes of expressions, such as the neo-romantics of the 1940s, the Beats of the 1950s, and the counter-cultural visionaries of the 1960s, they continue to affirm a redemptive aesthetic that links *poesis* with the occult power while disowning the reactionary politics of high modernists such as Yeats, Eliot and Pound. Art remains the alternative order to rationalising and inevitably comprised political systems (2005, pp.42-43)

Late-modernist poetics shares the defining avant-garde conviction of creating ruptures, what the French poet Arthur Rimbaud calls 'change life' (Hopkins 2004, p.3). The therapeutic concern of the group of poets belonging to the late-modernist avant-garde tradition brings them close to a shamanic purpose. These poets resist the sense of conformity and

submissiveness that has developed within late capitalism as a sign of psycho-social sickness. The occult in its contemporary form becomes a projection of personal desire that remains compartmentalised as fragmented experience in the psychological cineplex. In order to engage with the occult these poets arm themselves with a critical deployment of the shamanic that had previously been circumscribed by the occult in its guise of lost spirituality. By this use of the shamanic as a type of poetic practice, these poets critique the relationship of passivity that is inherent in what occultism calls magic by focusing on its practical and performative aspects. The shamanic draws its strength from an eclectic range of epistemology including the archaic form of shamanism. A note of caution: while these poets put recognisable emphasis on certain ideas which can be indicated as shamanic, they have never identified themselves as a particular group or a school. However, I am guided by Eric Mottram's conviction: 'a group may use systems which group them.' Accordingly, the modifier shamanic has been used instead of shamanism to describe 'the systems' that inform a radical poetic practice, oppose commodity-fetishism and indulge in various experiments in art with an urgency of social change.

The German avant-garde artist and self-proclaimed shaman, Joseph Beuys was one of the forerunners in linking contemporary art with the shamanic. He used the homeopathic doctrine of likeness, *similia similibus curantur* (literally meaning 'like cures like') to explain his shamanic defiance against Nazi fascism. Beuys, of course, was a member of the German Air Force during the Second World War, and several of his works exploit this homeopathic rationality as a way to come to terms with Nazi consciousness; *Tallow* (1977) is a case in point. James George Frazer is one of the scholars to detect the presence of the law of similarity in primitive societies. In 'Sympathetic Magic' such as in *voodoo* where resemblance entails magical connection the effect is said to resemble the cause (Frazer 1922, p.12). Piers Vitebsky's study on a Peruvian tribe exemplifies this notion. Among the Sora tribe the cause of illness or misfortune is always attributed to the magical darts of an aggressor. Hence, 'a cure can be effected only by a shaman who possesses an identical kind of dart to that used by the aggressor, which burrows into the patient and draws its fellow dart out into the open by mutual recognition' (1995, pp. 110-111). In his now-famous essay, 'The Uncanny', Sigmund Freud holds 'the association of ideas' as a link between the vocation of an artist and the magic of a shaman. In sympathetic magic, for example, if a carven shape of an individual is damaged, it goes on to damage the real individual. Similarly, through placing an anointed knife on the image, a

wound of the individual can be treated. In this type of association of ideas, in Timothy Materer's summary, 'Freud identifies two principles—similarity (as in the craving) and contiguity (as in the weapon); in literary art, the principles would be termed metaphor and metonymy. The artist is thus linked to the shaman, and magic with literary technique' (1995, p. 11).

These notions of illness and mutual recognition for therapeutic healing constitute the meeting ground for both the contemporary poets under study and the ethnographic shamans. In *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy,* Eliade posits that shamans 'cannot be regarded as merely sick; their psychopathic experience has a theoretical content. For if they have cured themselves and are able to cure others, it is because they know the mechanics, or rather, the theory of illness' (1964, p.31). Loosely drawing on Mircea Eliade's version of shamanism, Iain Sinclair proposes a 'manifesto' for shamanic poetry.[5] In an exhibition held in 1991, entitled, 'The Shamanism of Intent', Sinclair, in a rather hyperbolic tone, declared that a 'marginal' group of contemporary artists, poets, musicians, painters could be regarded as 'disinherited shamans' (1997, p. 240). Sinclair observes that the shaman volunteers for a sickness to seek help from the 'other-than-human' and heal his community, analogous to the way Eliade describes the role of a shaman in the Tungus speaking people of Siberia.

In his *Archaic Technique of Ecstasy*, Eliade, a scholar of comparative religion, makes a rather controversial claim that shamanism is site-specific and should not be judged out of its Siberian context. One of the major propositions that Eliade forwards in his book involves the idea of an alternative cure to social illness. Eliade famously describes that shamans 'cannot be regarded as merely sick; their psychopathic experience has a theoretical content. For if they have cured themselves and are able to cure others, it is because they know the mechanics, or rather, the theory of illness' (p.31). For Eliade, the theory involves a contact with the 'other-than-human', the supernatural. During his rigorous initiation, the soul of the shaman is taken to the supernatural world by a culture hero, a bird-of-prey mother, who teaches her apprentice the ways to sustain and cure the disease of others (a Romantic parallel would be the Keatsean flight with

[5] Ken Edwards in a survey of the literary underground scene claimed that the short article by Geraldine Monk and Maggie O'Sullivan in *Time Out* in the early 90s as a 'joint manifesto' of shamanism. But when asked about it, Monk in an e-mail told me that their shared observation was not 'a joint-manifesto.' Contrarily, Sinclair in *Lights Out for the Territory* claimed his catalogue-essay on the exhibition of Brian Catling and Gavin Jones, 'The Shamanism of Intent' as a 'retrospective manifesto' for shamanic poetry. (London, Granta, 1997), p. 239.

the nightingale that allowed the figure of the poet to form his 'negative capability').

Iain Sinclair found Eliade's claim relevant in his depiction of the growing trend among some of his fellow poets and artists:

> Certain artists …began to look strange…. Their behaviour, this remorseless pursuit of discomfort, this restless and fruitful irritation, struck me as exemplary….The will to continue, improvise upon chaos, could be defined as 'intent': a 'sickness vocation', as Eliade has it, an elective trauma. The health of the city …and perhaps of the culture itself, seemed to depend on the flights of redemption these disinherited shamans. …could summon and sustain. They were associated in mind with other avatars of unwisdom: scavengers, dole-queue antiquarians, bagpeople, outpatients, muggers, victims, millennium babblers. (*LOFTT* p.240)

It needs to be mentioned though, decades before Sinclair's self-proclaimed 'manifesto', the Cambridge poet J.H. Prynne foregrounded the radical potential of shamanic discourse in his 1969 chapbook *Aristeas, In Seven Years*. In Sinclair's assessment, Prynne's poem is the 'last shamanic text' with 'genuine and visible scholarship.' In the title-poem, Prynne demonstrates his interests in the political economy of the mythic past, exemplified through a reconstructed pre-consumer society in a Thracian legend. Similarly, Eric Mottram's *Book of Herne*, as the name suggests, is a reworking of British shamanistic lore. The British poet with Irish immigrant parents, Maggie O'Sullivan also uses the shamanic with an explicit allusion to Joseph Beuys in the title of her 1993 collection, *In the House of the Shaman*. Here O'Sullivan navigates through the aural and visual aspects of both written and spoken language, seeking 'another weather system' and a renewed kinship. Quite evidently, O'Sullivan's use of the shamanic is different from others in her 'innovative' use of language, which she explores in order to find an alterity to her lyrical self.

But the Newcastle based Barry MacSweeney comes close to presuming sickness in his poetry. In 'Brother Wolf,' MacSweeney writes with a desire to identify himself with the alienated literary genius of the past in an effort to understand the dilemma of creative frenzy. Brian Catling, in contrast, is interested in a tribal 'potlatch' that Sinclair identifies as 'a reverse archaeology, in which the maker returns the artefacts to the earth' (Sinclair p.256). Iain Sinclair, in his own work, makes the city his subject, and explores traces of the malign wills of the past in urban landscape with his psychogeographical observation. Ulli Freer also concerns himself with the cityscape, but with an interventionist attitude. In 'Phone Booth', Freer locates himself in a public space with a photo-strip in order to challenge the passport-based identity insisted on by

the State. His shamanistic energy is felt in his performance where he stages his defiance of the State in a ritualistic frenzy, aiming to conduct the social chaos. Bob Cobbing, too, is interested in intervention, but through 'voicive poetry'; his 'Hymn to the Sacred Mushroom' voices out the atomic in a shamanic ecstasy. Among others, the shamanic in British poetry, can also be located in the work of Robert Sheppard, Geraldine Monk, Bill Griffiths, Allen Fisher, Andrew Duncan, Lee Harwood, John James, Del Olsen, Denise Riley and Lawrence Upton.

The type of poetry studied here sprang up in the aftermath of the sixties within the corpus of what is now known as British Poetry Revival (BPR) and its off-shoot Linguistically Innovative Poetry. Eric Mottram's crucial essay, 'British Poetry Revival, 1960-75' maps the activities that thrived within the small press network, albeit in absence of support from the establishment, and distance themselves from both Eliotesque High Modernism and the Movement poets' rejection of formally open works. Poets involved in the BPR looked for inspiration in the different avant-garde experiments that were taking place in continental Europe and among the Beats and bohemian contexts in America. In particular they responded to the closed structure and insularity of British poetry, with which it proclaimed itself the inheritor of literary tradition with support and consensus of the university based academics. Poets of the BPR resisted the idea that there is a seamless homogeneous evolution in British poetry that can constitute the poetic mainstream. Their rebellious violation of ordinary language and poetic forms in essence resists all forms of homogeneity. However, the immediate point of reaction for BPR has to be the Movement Orthodoxy led by Philip Larkin and its insular attitude to poetry that has given rise to a nationalist concept of 'mainstream' British poetry. Sinclair's 'manifesto' hence celebrates the 'outsider' status of shamanic poetry, and hails it as a 'significant marker' of British culture. He posits:

> Artists so stubborn, so ruinously estranged from the tribe, that their outcast status was something more useful than a disguise, a horn mask. Is it too preposterous to think of this delusion − that work is capable of re-enchanting place − as a reality, a significant marker of our culture? (1997, p.246)

Interestingly, there is an inherent contradiction in this claim. The flag of 'significant marker' is upheld on behalf of the margin is by a man who already enjoys popular recognition through his poetic fictions and whose books (unlike many of the other poets working mainly through small press

network) are shelved in the high-street bookshops.[6] So when Sinclair celebrates the shamanic not only as an alternative location for 'the margin' but also as the 'significant marker' of British culture, we are forced to rethink the far-reaching impact of shamanic discourse, and consider a possible refashioning of the centre-periphery dichotomy in the mainstream publishing houses, an idea that I shall explore in the next chapter.

From the onset, it needs to be mentioned that even within radical poetry there are differences about the way the shamanic should be approached. Andrew Duncan in an early essay published in *Angel Exhaust* (Vol. 12) opined that he was not willing to consider shamanic poetry anything more than a '*coup-de-theatre*.' He wrote: "A broad sector of contemporary Creative Persons does not at all mind dressing up as witches and wizards and proclaiming their closeness to Primal magic. How far is it from sha-persons to sword-and-sorcery novels? …or even from *Crow* to *In the House of Shaman*? …Shamanism in Western art has got about as much to do with Siberia and the Palaearctic as Aladdin has to do with China. But the exoticisms, the supernatural, the fine song and dance, offer a superb opportunity for a *coup-de-theatre*" (p.110).

Sean Bonney, a highly acclaimed poet in the radical circuit, is also critical of the nomenclature. Although he appreciates the transformative energy of the poetry of Maggie O'Sullivan or Ulli Freer that one normally links to shamanism, he finds such a linkage 'ugly' 'dull' and even 'reactionary'.[7] Niall McDevitt, reacting to Sean Bonney, claims that shamanism in poetry is 'a full time vocation', especially in the case of Ted Hughes, Peter Redgrove, and Maggie O'Sullivan.[8]

These reactions in a way hint at the complexity of the shamanic project. Duncan, for example, fails to recognise it as a critique of the spectacle. Bonney's reaction shows how difficult it is to maintain the momentum for an avant-garde work. McDevitt, on the other hand, is seeking a mystical dimension that is not always available to the poets concerned. I think the discomfort of seeing a contemporary poetry

[6] It could be argued though that Sinclair's popularity is relatively recent. However, his success has brought new attention to his earlier shamanic work *Lud Heat* (1975), and he has continued to pursue the same lines of thought of highlighting socially marginalised or deranged characters and understanding the 'reality' of place. In *Radon Daughters* (1994), for instance, he deals with a paranoid character in the Whitechapel hospital who is haunted by the fear of the atomic.

[7] Bonney, S. 'Some notes on Ulli Freer; his 'Speakbright Leap Passwood'. http://www.bbk.ac.uk/readings/r1/bonney.html. Accessed on August 15,2007

[8] http://www.bbk.ac.uk/readings/r2/niall.html Accessed on August 15,2007

attached to an archaic episteme restricts many from actually explaining the larger, albeit material, context of poet's use of these cultural practices. This dilemma, as we have already seen, troubles the moderns and the modernists alike. Therefore, it is no surprise that there has not been any comprehensive study of the tradition of shamanism in contemporary British poetry. Although there have been attempts to find shamanic influences on individual poets such as Simon Jarvis or Anthony Mellors on JH Prynne; Robert Sheppard or Robert Bond on Iain Sinclair; Clive Bush and William Rowe on Barry MacSweeney; Lawrence Upton or Robert Sheppard on Maggie O'Sullivan; Iain Sinclair or Simon Perril on Brian Catling, there have not been many studies that set out to explain the broader picture in which shamanic discourses in contemporary British poetry exist and continue to grow. Anthony Mellors's critical study of the hermetic aspects of Anglo-American modernism with particular reference to shamanism in Pound, Olson and Prynne is a rare exception. The situation has not been helped by the poets themselves who have somewhat refrained from setting up a theoretical framework to explain their poetic practice. There is no 'formal' consensus about what might be considered shamanic. These poets are varied in their ideas and language, and none of the poets is interested in attaching the label of shamanism to define their work, possibly to avoid the trap of being labelled in a fetishistic way. Iain Sinclair seems to be the odd one out.

Sinclair has no inhibition in reassuring that Brian Catling is the 'English Beuys' (*LOFTT* 269) with an ability to organise high 'energy events' (*LOFTT* 259). 'Wounded in the tongue, Catling insists upon the shaman's right to draw from his own traumatised flesh' (*LOFTT* 263). In contrast, the poet-critic Robert Sheppard seems to be more cautious in his approach to the shamanic. In his review of Maggie O'Sullivan's *In the House of the Shaman*, included his collection of essays, *Far Language,* Sheppard identifies the transformative aspect of Beuysian shamanism, pivotal to O'Sullivan, as a 'metaphor'. Sheppard's cautiousness is equally visible in *The Poetry of Saying* (2005) in which he stresses on the shape-shifting quality in O'Sullivan's language, the name-game and the fleshing out of language to explain the textual transformation without actually referring to the shamanic. Similarly, poet Aaron Williamson in an essay on "Writing Art" in *Art Monthly* mentions the 'unrealisable beyond the phantasmic speculation' in Catling's 'Written Rooms and Pencilled Crimes,' but falls short of calling it shamanic (1999, pp. 13-17). This discretion on the part of the poet-critics can be explained as a 'scholarly phobia' about the occult that modern men inherited from the Enlightenment, on which the next chapter will elaborate.

I will begin with a brief and polemical exploration of the context and import of shamanic elements in contemporary poetry. In particular I will try to distinguish the shamanic in contemporary poetry from its immediate precedents. The shamanic poets feel that the Movement poets have compromised the novelty and vision that were instrumental behind the growth of modernism. The key ideas of the shamanic as a proposition have to do with certain strands of post-structuralism, particularly with thinkers like Theodor Adorno, Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Georges Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva and Charles Bernstein, among others. In this study I investigate the shamanic in poetry by examining the work of five late modernist British poets: Iain Sinclair, Jeremy Prynne, Brian Catling, Barry MacSweeney, and Maggie O'Sullivan. The technique adopted by each of these shamanic poets is not only a means to an end, but also a type of informed understanding of the body (in its physical and metaphysical forms) that subsumes both theory and practice. From the start, I must attest that the decision to exclude certain other poets who share shamanic elements is due to the limit and scope of this study. Rather than making a survey of the shamanic poets, I am interested in explicating the shamanic through an understanding of its genealogy in connection to contemporary poetic practice.

For the sake of convenience, I have used Iain Sinclair and Maggie O'Sullivan as my specimens to tentatively divide contemporary shamanic poetry into two provisional categories. Sinclair's use of 'elective trauma' based on Mircea Eliade's phenomenological idea of shamanism as 'archaic techniques of ecstasy' forms the basis of my category, the 'Technicians of the Sacred.' The term, alluding to Jerome Rothenberg's anthology of primitive poetry from America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania, implies the desire to wrest spirituality away from the confines of religion and embody it in textual practice. This process involves transgressing generic correlations and investigating and enlisting the circularity of 'hidden' energies–past and present. I have discussed Prynne, Catling, and Sinclair under this category.

MacSweeney and O'Sullivan are discussed in terms of their attitude towards 'the body' where it stands as a figure of the material (i.e. social and textual) and the physical (i.e. individuals). While MacSweeney shows the physical body dismembered in a double gesture which exposes the destructive force of society, and at the same time evokes the scattered body of Dionysian ritual, Maggie O'Sullivan dissects the body of her text to observe its gestation (the birth of language). For O'Sullivan, who is the editor of a women's anthology of linguistically innovative poetry, the idea of the body comes close to that of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Bruce

Andrews. While building a case for the 'ecstatic', Andrews in his 'Paradise & Method,' proposes, 'in the root sense: to find yourself standing outside yourself.' He continues: 'The site of the body is social, set in time - socially saturated: the body of the reader (the potential body of a potential reader) & the body of the meaning, of the timely materials we make significance out of' (1996, p.51). O'Sullivan's survey of the materiality of language is ultimately guided by her desire to engage with the social. MacSweeney, on the other hand, explores his personal sickness not as a bodily breakdown, but a breakthrough of the sacredness and also of the social. In both instances, the artistic process of exploring the body, rather than the product that appears as a text, is important. Based on these criteria, I have discussed these two poets under the category of 'Technicians of the Body.' My categorisations are far from concrete as they overlap both in theory and in practice.

Because of the theoretical framework and experimental novelty, contemporary shamanic poetry has been located in what is now dubbed as the neo-avant-garde tradition of late-modernist British Poetry. Etymologically, avant-garde is a military term for the advanced group of soldiers who take a leading role in the battleground. That does not imply that they have cut loose from all traditions, and exist in a vacuum. Recent interest in the avant-garde evinces renewed investigation in the avant-garde's relationship with previous literary movements, mainly with Romanticism.[9] Especially in our discussion of the shamanic in Britain, we need to explore the reasons for the critical attention received by the figure of the shaman that helped its transmutation into the figure of the poet. This will demand a survey of other occult figures that have been traditionally associated with poetic or artistic creation. The appropriation of the Celtic bards by the Romantics offers an interesting parallel. The performative aspect of the bardic makes such a connection even more relevant to our understanding of the shamanic in British poetry.

In Chapter 1, I examine the contextual and theoretical grounds for the development of the shamanic. In particular, I explore the poet-shaman axis to consider the reasons for the transformation and appropriation of an ethnographic or mythic category by twentieth century poets into an aesthetic one. I have briefly reviewed the dominant philosophical and poststructuralist ideas that were influential behind the shaping of the shamanic as a poetics. I begin with a survey of some anthropological literatures on shamanism to understand the poet-shaman relationship.

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[9] Murphy, R. *Theorising the Avant-Garde*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.3.

Chapter 2 traces the genealogical link between contemporary radical poetry and Romanticism with particular focus on the mutation of the figure of the poet. The espousal of the shamanic idea is akin to the way the Romantics appropriated the bardic materials to suit to their own poetic purpose. The bard's ability to withstand a history of subversion has become a source of inspiration for the bardic lore. While the bardic materials offered artistic autonomy to the Romantic poet, their inclusion in 'mainstream' poetry concurred with different experiments with literary forms. The growth of ballad as a bardic form that proffers a space for communal participation is an idea that merits attention. The location of the bardic material in the occult or mystical category because of its connection with the Druid order makes the use of allegory a shield from scholarly phobia or suspicion. It evinced a hermeneutic possibility out of a rather hermetic category (i.e. bardic/ druidry). However, on the other side of the Atlantic, Allen Ginsberg's unashamed rationalisation of the hermetic category is ridden with an agenda that is both personal and social. Ginsberg's understanding of William Blake is a 'technique' that foreshadows the contemporary shamanic project. I argue that Ginsberg exploits Blake to re-baptise himself to overcome a near-death experience almost in the manner of a shamanic initiation. Ginsberg's contribution to BPR, especially through his hugely influential reading at the Royal Albert Hall poetry festival which galvanised the alternative poetry movement in Britain, paves the way for the discussions on the technicians of the sacred and the technicians of the body.

Chapter 3 looks at the Technicians of the Sacred with textual reference to J.H. Prynne, Iain Sinclair, and Brian Catling. I examine *The White Stones* (1969) and *Wound Response* (1974) to understand Prynne's shamanism. The shamanic in Sinclair is explained with reference to his attitude towards occult energy that he tried to detect in his *Lud Heat* (1975) and *White Chappell and Scarlet Tracings* (1987). Catling's Cyclops series, which he started in 1994 and continued to work on, allows me to draw on the collision between a text and the site of its production within the frame of a shamanistic ritual. The chapter argues that these poets reject the logic of contemporary culture and display negative entropy through their unavailability to the rationalism of economic growth.

Chapter 4 studies the other category of the shamanic, the Technicians of the Body. I mainly look at Barry MacSweeney's 'Brother Wolf' and Maggie O'Sullivan's *In the House of the Shaman* to recognise their handling of the shamanic. I argue that the body plays a crucial role for the female poet, O'Sullivan. The body for O'Sullivan is tinged with identity politics that she expresses through pre-linguistic uttering almost in the

manner of *mantric* chants. MacSweeney is also interested in finding an identity through the bodies of other creative genii of the past that he keeps on possessing.

The concluding chapter revisits the issues of sacredness and the body as shamanic propositions. It mentions the problems of terminology in defining the radical poetics practised by certain late modernist poets. It also points out the significance and relevance of the present study.