

The Apocalyptic Theology of Nick Cave

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Abstract: The Apocalyptic Theology of Nick Cave

This thesis argues that the concept of apocalypse, or revelation, is central to the theology of Nick Cave as expressed in his body of written and performed work. It examines this work, with particular reference to his lyrics, as expressing a systematic theology rooted in divine revelation. In so doing, the thesis argues the virtues of taking Cave seriously as a contemporary artist engaging with theological concerns, as well as placing him in a literary tradition of writers who have made (particularly, but not solely, Christian) theology a central concern in their work from a position outside and/or critical of an established church. The thesis takes on wider concepts such as Cave's relation to tradition and the importance of individualism in his work, clarifying these large questions by arguing that they are best approached from a theological standpoint. As well as being an intervention in the nascent and presently stagnant field of Cave studies, the thesis offers a literary paradigm for the reading of lyrics which seeks to emphasise both the continuity and the discontinuity between song lyrics and lyric poetry. In doing so, it synthesises this literary approach with the influence of sociological popular music studies in outlining how media and audience reception operate in relation to the text and the performer.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Parts of Chapter 5 have been published, in rewritten form, online in the *Honest Ulsterman*,¹ and are reproduced here with that publication's kind permission.

¹ Ciarán Treacy, "Self-Destructive Desire," *Honest Ulsterman*, Verbal Group, June 2019. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

Note on Texts

Parenthetical in-text citations are to Cave-authored texts; *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), and Cave's novels: *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (London: Penguin, 1990) and *The Death of Bunny Munro* (London: Canongate, 2009). The text being cited will in all cases be evident from context.

All Biblical quotations are taken from the Authorised Version, which I have chosen to refer to as the King James Version for consistency as that is the terminology used by Cave himself.

This thesis is on Cave-authored texts, including those made in collaboration. Most of these will be uncontroversial. Aside from those writings published under his own name (the novels, lyrics and various short pieces of prose, poetry and drama in the two *King Ink* collections), Cave is the sole credited author for the screenplays of the films *The Proposition*, and *Lawless*, and one of several authors for *Ghosts...of the Civil Dead*, all directed by John Hillcoat. More recently, the documentaries *20,000 Days on Earth* (Channel 4, 2014) and *One More Time with Feeling* (Bad Seed Ltd., 2016) both in different ways feature voiceover written and performed by Cave (alongside other creative input), and so I consider him at least a co-author of both these films. I do not take any of these films to be solely his work, but I believe the influence of his creative input is particularly easy to overlook with reference to the documentaries' presentation of his creative persona, as examined in detail in Chapter 4.

Introduction: A System of the Sacred?

In her exploration of Cave's theology, Lyn McCredden asks:

Is there a system to Cave's sacred? (And does that matter?) That is, can we discern in the spectrum of the songwriter's attention to the sacred anything like recurring chords, not to say a manifesto or theology?²

This thesis offers an affirmative answer to all of McCredden's questions. Yes, there is a system to Cave's sacred, or at least one can be discerned with care and attention. Yes, this does matter, because the way in which this system positions Cave has profound implications for how we read his work. And yes, there are certainly "recurring chords," which resolve themselves into, if not a straightforward manifesto, certainly a theology: an apocalyptic theology.

By this, I do not mean merely that Cave writes a lot of apocalypses, nor that he has a particular interest in eschatology, though both of these things are true, as will be seen throughout this thesis. The word "apocalypse" originates from the Greek *apokalúptō*, which means "to disclose/unveil," as in Revelation, or "the Apocalypse." The OED defines "apocalyptic" first as "Of or pertaining to the 'Revelation' of St. John," and second as "Of the nature of a revelation or disclosure; revelatory, prophetic."³ It is the second of these definitions that I primarily apply to Cave's theology, though keeping the first in mind throughout. My argument is that the nature and character of revelation has a particular significance to Cave's theology. It constitutes the intervention of the divine into the mundane or fallen, and the recognition by the human of the will and/or nature of God. In the course of this thesis, I will show how revelation suffuses Cave's work: in his approach to tradition, in his eschatology, in the

² Lyn McCredden, "Fleshed Sacred: The Carnal Theologies of Nick Cave," *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 195.

³ "apocalyptic, adj. and n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press. Sept. 2019. Web. 4 Sept. 2019.

fallen world of his work, in his portrayal of the self, in romantic and sexual desire and love. In so doing, a kind of system will emerge, even if it is one often defined primarily by opposition to what it is not.

Nick Cave has released a remarkable range of material throughout his forty or so years active as a creative individual in the public sphere. To take the music alone: one album with The Boys Next Door; at least three albums and two EPs with The Birthday Party, depending on how one counts;⁴ two with Grinderman; sixteen with the Bad Seeds, to say nothing of rarities collections, live recordings and such; and ten full film scores, co-written variously with Warren Ellis, Mick Harvey, and Blixa Bargeld. Other major works include two novels (*And the Ass Saw the Angel* and *The Death of Bunny Munro*), a prose poem (*The Sick Bag Song*), an opera (*Shell Shock*, co-written with Nicholas Lens), two lectures (“The Flesh Made Word,” written to be broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1996, and “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” a combination of lecture and music performed at London’s South Bank Centre in 1999), three screenplays⁵ (*Ghosts... of the Civil Dead*,⁶ *The Proposition* and *Lawless*) and various pieces of short fiction and drama (collected in *King Ink* and *King Ink II*). In the face of this vast amount of material, the critic naturally needs to focus to avoid being overwhelmed. To this end, I will be focusing primarily on the lyrics in my analysis. This is partly on a practical basis, these being the main part of Cave’s corpus, but also on the assumption that an artist’s career is best analysed by concentrating on the medium in which they have worked far more than any other. Other works will still feature, however; the two novels will be referenced at various points, Chapter 3 contains a sustained reading of *The Proposition*, and

⁴ Much of The Birthday Party’s early recorded output was rereleased on several different albums over the years. *The Complete Lyrics* lists only two full albums, but includes enough ancillary material, to my mind, to justify the inclusion of at least one other of these LP-length collections of Birthday Party songs.

⁵ According to interviews and industry news, Cave has at various points in the last two decades been hired to write other screenplays, but none of these have been produced.

⁶ Co-written with Gene Conkie, Evan English, John Hillcoat, and Hugo Race.

“The Flesh Made Word,” Cave’s clearest theological statement to date, will be featured regularly.

As this is a single-author study, a word or two on biography may be apposite here. Roland Boer is correct to suggest that Cave has carefully controlled reception of his work through “a complex of autobiography,” which extends across interviews across media as well as various lectures and shorter written prose, and to urge suspicion wherever Cave attempts to direct criticism in this way with his use of the authorial “I.”⁷ Critics of Cave’s work have at times been all too willing to abide by the biographical strictures he himself sets down, most notably the teleological division of his work into “Old Testament” and “New Testament” periods.⁸ Critics of all stripes have also been far too quick to draw direct lines between Cave’s biography and the content of his love songs. It is difficult to find any analysis of *The Boatman’s Call* in particular that does not mention two particular relationships in which Cave was involved around the time, in a manner that seems reductive at best, insensitive at worst. All of this is enough to persuade me to be wary of biographical comparisons.

Yet, despite all of this, it is next to impossible to entirely erase biography from the equation. Cave’s status as a rock performer means that he is seen to embody his lyrics in a way that no writer in a non-performative medium ever is.⁹ In performance, he retains a degree of control over the presentation of his words. He operates in the realm of contemporary celebrity culture, where the distance (or lack thereof) between author and persona is a common subject of speculation.¹⁰ What is more, Boer is perhaps too quick to entirely abjure Cave’s lectures, “The Flesh Made Word” in particular. While he is correct to be

⁷ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 1-15.

⁸ See Chapter 5 for more on this.

⁹ Something seen in the lyrics even as written. The description of the murderous narrator in “O’Malley’s Bar” (“tall and thin,” “raven hair”) (260, 264) sounds remarkably like Cave himself, while the recitation of his bandmates’ names at the end of “Babe, I’m On Fire” (373) suggests that Cave himself is the narrator. See Chapter 4 for more.

¹⁰ See Chapter 4.

suspicious of Cave's presentation of his own Bible-reading biography in this lecture (as well as various interviews and his 1998 introduction to Mark's Gospel), Boer misses that there is still a good deal to be learned from Cave's self-presentation in itself, and particularly from his explanation of his concept of revelation through language in "The Flesh Made Word," which will be examined in some detail in chapter 2.

In this thesis, I have little interest in Nick Cave the private individual. My focus is less on his own personal theology as he might express it, and more on the particular aspects of apocalyptic theology that emerge through his work. This does not mean that the former is irrelevant, rather that it is only important insofar as it illuminates the latter. Likewise, I will use a good deal of material from interviews and pieces which include aspects of biography, such as the lectures, but my focus will always be on how these relate to the work. For instance, Chapter 4 will examine how aspects of Cave's self-presentation, the persona that comes through in his work, help to elucidate a theology of the self. As Robert Eaglestone says in his own examination of "Cave's Religion:"

About the religious commitments of the "real" person I know nothing and these are not matters of interest for this chapter: about the religious commitments of the other "Nick Cave," however, who lives in the public and aesthetic realm, much can be said, and every time I use this name, even at the most personal moments, it is this Nick Cave who I name (if it seems otherwise, it is an unavoidable effect of rhetoric).¹¹

Likewise, it is the theology of the public "Nick Cave" which concerns me here, not that of the private individual bearing that name. I am, however, interested in what Eaglestone goes on to criticise: the widespread assumption among (chiefly non-academic) music critics, writers and fans that the two are

¹¹ Robert Eaglestone, "From Mutiny to Calling Upon the Author: Cave's Religion," *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 164-165.

synonymous, or at least that their relationship is potentially revealing.

Examination of this assumption will be an important element of Chapters 4 and 5.

The State of Cave Studies

The most thorough interrogation of Cave's work to date is Roland Boer's 2012 book *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse*. Boer's book, like this thesis, is concerned in large part with the theology of Cave's work. There are, however, important differences. Boer's five-volume series *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth* concerns the intersections of Marxist theory and theology. Thus he is concerned in large part with Marxist cultural theory, frequently filtering Cave through the likes of Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch. Relatedly, his work takes on a general cultural studies perspective, examining not only Cave's written works, but his actual music, and his position in the cultural industry more generally. While I agree with Boer that the field of Cave studies has at times been overly logocentric, the present thesis is ultimately a literary enquiry. While I take aspects of vocal and bodily performance, and of Cave's wider cultural status, into account at numerous points, ultimately I am concerned with his words, albeit as performed rather than written media. Moreover, my concern is with the theology that emerges from his work precisely *as* theology, rather than as the means to Marxist praxis. This is not to say that theoretical concerns will not arise – Adorno and Walter Benjamin have substantial roles to play in chapters 5 and 2 respectively, for instance – but rather that my focus is rather different to Boer's. It must also be acknowledged that Boer's book was published in 2012 and is therefore out of date not only with Cave's work (there have been two Bad Seeds albums in the intervening years, for instance), but also with the state of Cave studies. The reader will notice frequent engagements with Boer throughout this thesis, as testament to

the fact that though I frequently differ from his arguments, his work has frequently served as a starting place for my own thought on Cave's theology.

There are two other major sources for academic work on Cave: *Cultural Seeds*, published in 2009,¹² edited by Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell, and *The Art of Nick Cave*, published in 2013, edited by John H. Baker. Both collections of essays represent a heterodoxy of approach and subject matter from a variety of contributors: the Baker collection, for instance, contains essays by noted figures in literary criticism (Fred Botting, Nick Groom), performance studies (Carl Lavery, David Pattie¹³) and popular music studies (Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, who also features in the Welberry and Dalziell collection), as well as practicing clinical psychologist Dan Rose. This breadth of approach, however, means that neither collection achieves a great deal of depth of analysis. Given that the Welberry and Dalziell collection in particular is the earliest book-length analysis of Cave, this is inevitable, as it serves as the beginning of the field, to all intents and purposes. The reader will notice that I have referred rather more to the Baker collection in this thesis, reflecting the fact that this later collection is in the position of being able to respond to points raised in the earlier book. Thus, for instance, Wiseman-Trowse refers back to his earlier article for the development of a point, and Baker's own article on "Nick Cave: Christian Artist?" refers back to articles on similar topics by Robert Eaglestone and Lyn McCredden in the Welberry and Dalziell collection. The Baker collection thus serves as a more developed entry into the field of Cave studies.

Other sources on Cave do of course exist, though they are of mixed quality. The 2011 ebook *Read Write [Hand]*, edited by Sam Kinchin-Smith, is a multidisciplinary collection which combines essays (including one by Nick

¹² The edition of *Cultural Seeds* I have cited in this thesis is a reprint by a different publisher from 2016.

¹³ A rewritten version of Pattie's article from this collection was used as sleeve notes for the 2017 Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds compilation *Lovely Creatures*.

Groom which is something of a precursor to his essay in *The Art of Nick Cave*, covering similar material) with poems and “mixtapes” of Cave and related work. I have not cited it in this chapters because it lacks direct relevance to this thesis, but its novel approach and liminal position between fan tribute and academic analysis are enough to recommend it. Other useful background on Cave’s career can be gained from numerous documentaries: a 2001 episode of *The South Bank Show*; the “Do You Love Me Like I Love You” series, short films accompanying the remastered versions of the Bad Seeds albums up to *DIG*, *LAZARUS*, *DIG!!!* and featuring a collection of “talking heads”-style interviews with band members, critics, and fans;¹⁴ and, most notably, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard’s 2013 *20,000 Days on Earth* and Andrew Dominick’s 2016 *One More Time with Feeling*, which will be examined in detail in Chapter 4.

The most substantial source of non-academic material on Cave, however, is the music press. I have avoided making use of reviews in this thesis, though I have found them to be useful for illustrating, for instance, the initial critical reception of a particular album – I have used them for precisely this purpose when presenting material from this thesis before an audience. Far more useful, however, are interviews. The 2011 compilation *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint*, edited by Mat Snow, has been of great use to me, as has a 2013 collection of interviews and reviews published by *Uncut* magazine. The two share only two interviews in common, which is in itself testament to the sheer range of interviews Cave has done. The other major source that has emerged in the last year or so is *The Red Hand Files*, a website where Cave directly answers questions from fans, generally at some length. Cave’s answers here can and do provide insight into his thinking, but given that he chooses the questions from, presumably, a large

¹⁴ Fuller information about these, as well as short excerpts, can be found at <https://www.nickcave.com/films/do-you-love-me-like-i-love-you/>.

selection, these are better viewed as essays on particular topics than interviews, being more reflective than spontaneous.

The reader may notice that almost all of this material was published around the early 2010s, specifically between 2009 and 2014. Why was there such a concentration of Cave-related material in this period? I would suggest that it was because of the sheer volume of Cave's output at this time. Between these years he released the second Grinderman album, a Bad Seeds album (*Push the Sky Away*), a novel (*The Death of Bunny Munro*), at least one film he had scripted (*Lawless* and, at least in part, *20,000 Days on Earth*), and no fewer than six film soundtracks¹⁵ (*The Girls of Phnom Penh*, *The Road*, *West of Memphis*, *Lawless*, *Loin des Hommes* and *Shell Shock*). The third (and most recent to date) edition of Cave's *Complete Lyrics* was also published in 2013. Cave has always been a prolific artist, but this period is not only his most productive, but his most diverse. It is not surprising, then, that he would attract academic and critical attention. This period also saw the 30th anniversary of his earliest extant recordings,¹⁶ drawing attention to his relative longevity as a creative force. In the years since, he has been rather less prolific, probably partly owing to the sudden death of his son, Arthur, in 2015, the focus of *One More Time with Feeling*. Perhaps owing to this, academic attention has waned, and there have been no major publications on Cave since 2013.

Reading Lyrics

There are, it must be acknowledged, dangers in taking a primarily literary approach to song lyrics, as I do here. These primarily lie in the treatment of a song as essentially interchangeable with a poem. I do not follow the widespread

¹⁵ I am not counting *20,000 Days on Earth*, whose soundtrack was composed of previously-released material by Cave.

¹⁶ The Boys Next Door's *Door, Door*, from 1979. The Birthday Party started releasing material in 1980, though Cave's *Complete Lyrics* begins in 1981, with the album *Prayers on Fire*.

convention of taking a text by a songwriter without musical accompaniment to be a poem. Boer, for instance, consistently refers to the lyrics of songs which never appeared on a Cave album as “poems” in their published form – whether he is unaware of the fact that they were in fact recorded and released¹⁷, or chooses to ignore this is unclear. All of the lyrics to which he refers in this way are included in Cave’s *Complete Lyrics*, though Boer refers to the versions published in the 1997 anthology *King Ink II*. The implication is that song lyrics are seen as poems if the reader has not heard them performed as songs – or, reversing the equation, that poems are transmuted into lyrics in the act of recording. Even a musicologist as distinguished as Wilfrid Mellers makes use of this distinction; in his 1984 book on Bob Dylan, *A Darker Shade of Pale*, he uses the word “poem” to refer to the words of the songs when considered independently of the music.

The problem with this approach is that the texts in question were written *as* songs. As thorny a subject as intentionality might be, it surely matters when considering how to categorise a particular work. If Cave writes what he perceives as a song lyric, the critic must make a most persuasive case indeed for regarding it as anything else. Moreover, in Simon Frith’s words:

[T]o treat the distinction between poetry and lyric as a distinction between the written and the spoken word is aesthetically misleading. There is, to put this another way, a continuity between poetry and song, rather than a clear division. [...] It is, after all, precisely the refusal to draw a clear boundary between poetry and song that has made African-American musicians so important for twentieth-century mass culture.¹⁸

¹⁷ The majority of those to which he refers, such as “The Ballad of Robert Moore and Betty Coltrane” and “The Girl at the Bottom of My Glass” were released on the 2005 *B-Sides and Rarities* album. Others include “The Sweetest Embrace,” written for and included on Barry Adamson’s 1996 album *Oedipus Schmoedipus* (with vocals by Cave).

¹⁸ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard UP, 1996), 178.

This latter point is true of poets as well – Langston Hughes is an obvious example of a poet whose work is overtly informed by musical forms, while contemporary poets like Paul Muldoon and Simon Armitage move easily between poetry and lyric, while maintaining a distinction between the two forms. A related point is made by Keith Negus and Pete Astor (who also cite Armitage in support of their thesis): “Poets listen to, read and are influenced by song lyrics. In turn, songwriters read, listen to and are influenced by poets.”¹⁹

With this formal interplay in mind, Mellers’s usage of the word “poem” is less problematic than Boer’s, insofar as it allows for this kind of simultaneous continuity and distinction between poem and song, but it still makes the leap that song lyrics, once divorced from music, automatically transfigure into poems. When Mellers describes the words of “Gates of Eden” as a “Blakean poem,”²⁰ is the suggestion that Dylan wrote a poem entitled “Gates of Eden,” and only belatedly set this to music? If so, he does an immense disservice to Dylan and other songwriters by failing to pay due attention to the holistic nature of the art. What is more, there is a danger of going too far in seeing song lyrics and poetry as shading into each other, and ignoring what is unique about each form. One practitioner who certainly seems to fear this is Jarvis Cocker. In the introduction to his collected lyrics, *Mother, Brother, Lover*, he writes:

I have always had an extreme aversion to the way lyrics are often typeset to resemble poetry. Lyrics are *not* poetry: they are the words to a song. [...] I have attempted to arrive at a form that presents the words in an intelligible manner, designed to work on the page rather than mimic the way they come across in the songs. [...] These are still the words to songs

¹⁹ Keith Negus and Pete Astor, “Songwriters and song lyrics: architecture, ambiguity and repetition,” *Popular Music* 34.2 (2015): 234.

²⁰ Wilfrid Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (London: Faber, 1984), 138.

but, collected between these covers at least, they are now a written work in their own right. (Definitely *not* poetry though!)²¹

Cocker's presentation of his lyrics, which are often presented in blocks of text, with a paragraph roughly corresponding to a verse, resembles Dai Griffiths's concept of "anti-lyric," words from songs which "tend towards being *like* prose," as opposed to lyric, words which are "*like* poetry, in some ways."²² Griffiths's distinction is a useful and valuable one, but for the sake of simplicity and clarity, this thesis will use the term "lyric" throughout. This is done not least because, in terms of presentation, Cave's work has indeed tended to be "*like* poetry," with its strict left-hand margin and line breaks.²³ To take "Brompton Oratory" as an example:

Up those stone steps I climb
Hail this joyful day's return
Into its great shadowed vault I go
Hail the Pentecostal morn

The reading is from Luke 24
Where Christ returns to his loved ones
I look at the stone apostles
Think that it's all right for some (278)

The metre is not strict, as Cave stretches and contracts syllables in performance as demanded by the rhythm of the song, but it is fairly regular and is presented as such on the page. The second and fourth lines of each verse rhyme regularly throughout the song. Cave's adherence to rhyme as an organisational principle

²¹ Jarvis Cocker, *Mother, Brother, Lover: Selected Lyrics* (London: Faber, 2011), 3-4.

²² Dai Griffiths, "From lyric to anti-lyric: analyzing the words in pop song," *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 42-43.

²³ There are exceptions; the lyrics taken from both *Mutiny!* and *DIG, LAZARUS, DIG!!!* are spaced in apparently arbitrary ways, often with little relation to Cave's voicing, in their published form.

is very characteristic, at least up until 2013's *Push the Sky Away*. Compare this to a Cocker song like "Do You Remember the First Time?:"

You say you've got to go home 'cos he's sitting on his own again this evening and I know you're gonna let him bore your pants off again.
Oh now it's half past eight –
you'll be late.

But you say you're not sure:
though it makes good sense for you to live together,
still you bought a toy that can reach the places he never goes.
And now it's getting late.
He's so straight.²⁴

These first two verses of both songs take up similar amounts of time on the record, but Cocker's lack of adherence to regular line breaks, and lack of such fundamentals as capitalisation at the beginning of each new line (as opposed to new sentence) is striking. Cocker does use end rhymes, but in this case in the form of a couplet that rounds off each verse. The song's third verse, however, changes this final rhyme from end rhyme to internal rhyme via its printed presentation:

You wanna go home.
Well at least there's someone there that you can talk to, and you never
have to face up to the night on your own.
Jesus, it must be great to be straight.²⁵

The point of all of this is not to suggest that Cave is a songwriter who aspires to the condition of poet (a false hierarchy all too often invoked), but to display the

²⁴ Cocker, 35.

²⁵ Ibid.

different approaches which may be taken to textual presentation, and to suggest that while Cocker is right to identify the existence of a distinction between song lyrics and poetry, that there is a substantial degree of common ground between the two, so that one may for instance, at the very least, legitimately speak of the poetics of song lyrics.²⁶

The predominant characteristic of song lyrics is that they are part of a larger whole: that is ultimately what separates song lyrics from lyric poetry. Some critics, however, go too far in insisting on the inseparability of the lyrics (as in written form) from the song. For Frith:

Lyrics [...] are a form of rhetoric or oratory; we have to treat them in terms of the persuasive relationship set up between singer and listener. From this perspective, a song doesn't exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song.²⁷

While Frith's perspective does fine and necessary work in exploring the role of rhetoric²⁸ and the voice in the mediation of lyrics, he is uncharacteristically prescriptive here in his insistence on how critics "have to" regard lyrics, to the exclusion of any other possible perspective. Negus and Astor, for instance, have offered a valuable corrective by championing the role of the songwriter as constructor of the song's meaning (though not the sole arbiter of it) against the focus on audience reception which has tended to dominate popular music studies. Bearing this in mind, a counter-example to Frith would be Scott Walker, who, in an interview to promote the release of his *Selected Lyrics*, stated: "[T]he lyric will always guide you to what you need to do with the music. So if

²⁶ As in, for instance, the 2012 collection *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics*, edited by Charlotte Pence.

²⁷ Frith, 166.

²⁸ Though rhetoric is a prominent feature of the study of lyric poetry; as Jonathan Culler points out, the Roman lyric was closely associated with rhetoric in its own time (*Theory of the Lyric*, 61), while Romantic-derived conceptions of the lyric, which still hold a great deal of currency, privilege the lyric as speech act.

you get the lyric right, everything else will follow.”²⁹ This does not necessarily suggest that for Walker the song does indeed “exist to convey the meaning of the words,” but it does raise the concept of the lyric as a pre-existing entity which informs the song, rather than being no more than a subservient element of that song.

Indeed, there is a long-running tradition, especially in art music, of a pre-existing text being set to music by a composer – Beethoven’s use of Schiller’s “An die Freude” in his Ninth Symphony is perhaps the most famous example. While this tradition continues up to the present day (examples include Kate Bush’s “Flower of the Mountain,” which uses extracts from Molly Bloom’s speech from *Ulysses* and The Divine Comedy’s “Lucy,” a setting of Wordsworth’s Lucy poems), pop music is notable for the frequency with which words and music come from the same source, whether this be a single individual or a group. Many bands, Radiohead for instance, credit some or all of their individual members on each song, but with no breakdown of their individual contributions, suggesting a concept of collective creativity. Others, most famously the Beatles, have individual songs attributed to a specific writer (or writing partnership, in the case of Lennon/McCartney). Still others have a specific individual who is recognised as the primary songwriter, though other members may contribute songs from time to time. The Who’s Pete Townshend is a good example of this.

Even in these latter instances, the issue of actual authorship blurs somewhat – does Keith Moon, for instance, have any claim to authorship on the drum track of a recorded performance by The Who, or does that too belong to Townshend? This is where the question of credit becomes important. The crediting of a song is an assignation of legal authorship, and hence intellectual

²⁹ Alex Clark, ‘Scott Walker: “My last album was pretty perfect,”’ *The Guardian* 15 Jan 2018. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

ownership. This applies less, however, to the song as recorded artefact (whose copyright is, as a rule, owned by the record company) than to the song as “written” artefact – as, for instance, words or sheet music on a page (though this too must traditionally pass through a publisher, at least in a pre-Internet mode of publishing³⁰) which may then act as a guide to anyone wishing to play or study the song in question. The vast range of legal wrangles over the actual authorship of a song or songs, from accusations of plagiarism to disgruntled band members claiming to have been overlooked, stand as a testament to the mutability of this kind of authorship.

The pop songwriter as an individual artist is, in general, a little more clear cut. While the tradition in popular music of the single composer of both lyrics and music goes back at least as far as Cole Porter or Irving Berlin, the singer-songwriter who is the originator of their work as both performer and writer is more the contemporary ideal.³¹ A similar line can be traced back into folk music, shading into popular music with figures like Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams, but the authorship of, for instance, delta blues performers like Robert Johnson is complicated considerably by their position within a folk continuum, with their songs often being closer to reworkings of older songs than true originals.³² It is commonplace to trace the lineage of any given contemporary singer-songwriter back to Bob Dylan. This formulation, if rather simplistic (Dylan, after all, did not emerge from a vacuum), does at least make a degree of sense given Dylan’s oft-stated influence on subsequent songwriters. Nick Cave certainly seems to fit into this line, not least given that Dylan is an

³⁰ This is yet another way in which the proliferation of lyrics on the Internet (as examined by Dai Griffiths and others), as well as the plethora of amateur sites for guitar tablature and other written realisations of recorded music, have utterly transformed the industry in the past two decades.

³¹ There are extant recordings of Porter performing his songs, most famously “Anything Goes,” but these are few and far between, and his songs are generally known through the recordings of others.

³² Concepts of tradition and its reworking will be considered in more detail in Chapter 1.

oft-cited influence on him. Despite having spent his entire career in a succession of bands, there has been a general recognition for much of that career that Cave himself is the central figure – it is, after all, “*Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*,” and Cave’s claim to authorship of almost all of the lyrics of the Bad Seeds, the Birthday Party and Grinderman is vindicated by their publication in book form under his name alone.

Taking the same individual as both performer and writer, however, results in inevitable difficulties for the critic. To wit, is the performance of the text itself a kind of authorship? Does the song truly exist only in performance, and what is the value of the printed text?

In truth, the answers to these questions must vary from case to case, and indeed from critic to critic. After all, some artists compose largely or solely in the studio, while others meticulously work at both lyrics and music beforehand and bring a finished written project to the studio. Cave himself has done both – the songs for the Grinderman project were written in the studio, while his work with the Bad Seeds is written well ahead of recording. Both types are collected together in the published lyrics, obscuring any question of distinction, yet the difference in origins is clear – the Grinderman songs lack the lengthy verses which are characteristic of many Bad Seeds songs, and tend to cling closer to repeated refrains (rarely full choruses).

My position for this thesis rests on Cave’s status in a performed medium, as a performer of works mainly written expressly, and in most cases solely, by him. Cave has recorded many covers, which will receive some attention in Chapter 1, and his performance of these songs is indeed a kind of authorship, or re-authorship. In the main, though, his authorship is double in his performance of words and music which he has written. While this thesis is focused specifically on his words, by the nature of the medium, music and performance

cannot be entirely discounted without decontextualizing and devaluing the words, which were written to co-exist with these other elements.

This does reraise the question of the printed text – specifically, the lyrics as presented on album sleeves and in Cave’s *Complete Lyrics*. For the sake of the thesis, the recorded performance will in the main be taken as the text under examination. Deviations in live performance and occasionally in the printed text will be mentioned, but only as just that – deviations from an original. For ease of reference, the *Complete Lyrics* will be referenced throughout, but treated as a reference source alone.³³ This minor fudging is done on the basis that the printed versions of lyrics which exist for audiences are specifically intended as reference material, to clarify and elucidate the recordings, and should thus be treated as such.

It should be acknowledged that this is by no means the only approach available: Aidan Day, for instance, in his work on Dylan, most notably his book *Jokerman* (1988) was explicit about the fact that he was working on the *book* of Dylan’s lyrics, the printed text in and of itself. While this approach can only ever be partial in its elision of all questions of performance, it is nonetheless valuable in itself precisely for its narrow focus, which allows attention to the words *as written*. The more usual literary critical approach to Dylan, as typified by Michael Gray or Christopher Ricks, tends to concentrate on the performed text with reference to the printed, with success ranging from the partial to the substantial, though at times critics carry over unhelpful assumptions. Gray, for instance, claims admiringly at one point that Dylan’s “Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?” “almost stands up just as words on the page,”³⁴ begging the question – stands up to what, precisely? It seems the “written > performed”

³³ The exception will be the songs from the most recent Bad Seeds album at the time of writing, *Skeleton Tree*, whose lyrics have yet to be officially released. For these songs, I will be making use of my own transcriptions from the recorded text.

³⁴ Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man III: The Art of Bob Dylan* (London: Continuum, 2000), 141.

hierarchy endures even among critics like Gray who seek to champion performers like Dylan.

The question remains, however: if the lyric is taken to be a subcategory of the whole song, what *is* the song, the object of analysis, on first-principle ontological terms? For much music criticism, spearheaded by Frith, the song exists in the specific encounter with the listener, and nowhere else. For Negus and Astor, “songs endure irrespective of their manifestation in a sheet music score, a particular performance and an apparently definitive recording.”³⁵ Unfortunately, neither Frith’s experiential approach nor Negus and Astor’s abstract textual one is entirely satisfactory in critical terms. The former is so narrowly subjective and based around the individual critic that it is in constant danger of not saying anything verifiable or of wider interest,³⁶ while the latter is, in the terms just quoted at least, hopelessly vague. This is not to say, however, that there is no value to either. The Frith approach is useful for its focus on the *experience* of music, which is notoriously difficult to communicate in words, and validates the critic’s own emotional and instinctual response to what they hear – elsewhere, Frith argues passionately for the importance of critical value judgements.³⁷ Negus and Astor, meanwhile, as noted previously, do fine and necessary work in shifting at least some emphasis from the listener to the songwriter as bearer of the song’s meaning, which lends the critic far firmer ground in which to plant their flag.

My own approach is thus to steer something of a middle course: to acknowledge both the critic’s own impressions and the pre-existing authority of the songwriter. Nick Cave as a writer and performer is of prime importance in the pages ahead. Cave’s words from interviews will be quoted many times, on the basis that he can offer a degree of illumination of his own working practices

³⁵ Negus and Astor, 227.

³⁶ That said, see Chapter 1 for a (necessarily limited) defence of subjectivity in criticism.

³⁷ See *Performing Rites*, 1-21.

and attitudes, and that these can be regarded as performances to be analysed in their own right. This said, I come to this project not only as a scholar, but as a listener with a long and abiding interest in Cave's work, which would be intellectually dishonest to deny, not least as it was the impetus for this project. Moreover, I have my own angle: I am researching Cave's interaction with apocalyptic theology, and so I bring particular frameworks, theoretical and theological, to bear. While I believe these frameworks to be both fitting and fruitful, the viewpoint of any such academic project will always be limited, and at times I will have to gesture to larger questions which I lack the space to explore. Part of the purpose of this thesis must be to build up a bedrock of analysis of Cave's work on which future scholars may build, just as Boer's, Welberry and Dalziell's, and Baker's book have all been foundational to my own analysis of Cave.

As a minor note, it will be noted that I have generally used the word "narrator" to refer to the fictive figures³⁸ at the centre of Cave's lyrics, in place of "speaker," the more usual term in literary criticism. I have done this for two primary reasons. Firstly, "speaker" is self-evidently inappropriate in the context of a sung lyric. As for other alternatives, "singer" risks confusing this central figure with Cave himself, the literal physical singer, while something like "speaker-singer" is hopelessly awkward. Secondly, it is helpful to bear in mind the strong role that narrative plays in Cave's works. While I am concentrating primarily on his lyrics, as the primary part of his oeuvre, reference will be made to his novels and screenplays. Even in the lyrics, however, there is a regular return to narrative form of one kind or another. This arises partly out of folk song traditions (Cave's most clearly narrative-led album is, naturally, the folk pastiche *Murder Ballads*), especially as mediated through the likes of Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, but given his dalliances with other forms, it is clear that Cave

³⁸ Though the model of the fictive speaker in general is problematised in Chapter 5.

has a strong affiliation with narrative. A more thoroughgoing analysis of this tendency is much to be wished for in the future; for now, it must suffice simply to keep it in sight.

Outline of the Argument: Chapter by Chapter

As stated above, this thesis is concerned with the various ways in which apocalyptic theology makes itself felt in Cave's work. To this end, each chapter deals with a different aspect of this theology (though Chapters 4 and 5 are interrelated). I do this to demonstrate how apocalyptic theology informs all aspects of Cave's multifaceted work, from his earliest lyrics to his latest, across various forms and media. This is not to say that there will not be common threads: many of the same texts will recur in different chapters ("Higgs Boson Blues" and "Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?," to take but two), and threads from earlier chapters will be picked up later, particularly in Chapter 6, which weaves together the subjects of the previous chapters.

Chapter 1 examines an aspect of Cave's work that has received surprisingly little critical attention, with the exception of Nick Groom's work on murder ballads: his relationship to folk traditions. Tradition is a concept that will be problematised and approached in a number of different ways throughout this thesis, and so I begin by examining Cave's interest in the mythic and archetypal, in a Jungian sense. I am wary of the danger for archetypal criticism to stray into being ahistorical, and so I seek to anchor it by examining Cave's work in the light of literary and musical traditions, particularly with reference to Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*. This then leads me into a discussion of the role of cover versions in Cave's career, and of the 1986 Bad Seeds album *Kicking Against the Pricks*, an album composed entirely of cover versions. The chapter finishes by examining the 1996 Bad Seeds album *Murder Ballads*, which I argue is the exemplar of Cave's

irreverent approach to tradition, as will be seen in the following chapters in his approach to theological and religious traditions.

Chapter 2 traces the outline of Cave's eschatology, and places aspects of his approach in the context of histories of religious thought and art. I briefly trace the history of apocalypse as a genre, demonstrating the central importance of the concept of revelation to it. A key figure here (and elsewhere in the thesis) is William Blake, often cited in relation to Cave, and this chapter reveals just some of the ways in which their religious outlooks dovetail. Another, less obvious figure in this context is Walter Benjamin, whose take on apocalyptic temporality is remarkably analogous to Cave's. Bearing in mind these two figures in particular, I ask: can we fit Cave into a coherent tradition of apocalyptic writing?

Chapter 3 examines how Cave depicts the material world in relation to the profane. Some critics have tentatively identified Gnosticism or its offshoot Manicheanism as religious contexts in which Cave's work operates. Here I develop this identification as a way of elucidating an aspect of Cave's complex relationship to the concept of sin, and of depravity. I examine *The Proposition* in particular, with its setting in what one character describes as a "Godforsaken hole," and ask whether it can more accurately be described as a hellish landscape or a purgatorial one. To put the question another way: does the world of the film offer the possibility of redemption, or salvation?

Chapter 4 concerns the individual, which I argue is one of the central concerns of Cave's theology. For Boer, this aspect of Cave's theology is disappointingly in thrall to contemporary liberal capitalist ideology, but, while I think Boer has a point, I want to probe deeper. Continuing the eschatological focus, I identify a kind of election at play in Cave's ideas about the individual. I also examine how Cave's conscious self-presentation is an expression of these ideas. Is it a contradiction in terms to be an individualistic rock performer in a

medium based in collective expression and reception, or does this rather serve to complicate Cave's theology of the individual?

Chapter 5 continues this focus on the individual, but from a different angle, namely Cave's representation of the self. To this end, I examine concepts of lyric subjectivity from Adorno to Jonathan Culler to investigate how these ideas interact with the performed lyric as opposed to the written one. I go on to examine critically the common assumption that the lyric is self-revealing, and thus a potential site of encounter with Cave himself.³⁹ For Cave, I argue, the self is itself a site of encounter with divinity. But does this constitute an effective deification of the self? The implications of this will be examined, as will the possibility of a redemptive reading, that Cave's work can defend itself against such an accusation.

Finally, Chapter 6 shows all of these disparate strands come together – or, rather, how they don't. Rather, I identify Cave as a heretic, one who consciously and pointedly departs from any kind of orthodox doctrinal position. I show how his carnal theology, to use Lyn McCredden's term,⁴⁰ is at odds with both orthodox Christian and Gnostic asceticism, and how his theology is inherently humanistic. I also examine how the theology of Cave's later work has moved in a more agnostic direction. Is Cave, then, ultimately just one lone heretic crying in the wilderness? Or does his individualistic theology, paradoxically, locate him within a tradition of heresy?

In the conclusion, I return to McCredden's questions with which this introduction began to demonstrate that Cave does indeed have a systematic theology, even if the system is chaotic. More pressing, however, is McCredden's second question: "Does it matter?" This too I seek to answer in the affirmative to show that the theological positions sketched out over the course of this thesis

³⁹ In this instance, I do refer to Cave the private individual, in line with this assumption, as will be seen.

⁴⁰ McCredden, 194.

of a radical antinomianism and a vision of Christianity paradoxically rooted in both the individual's subjective experience and a connection to tradition have profound implications for further work on Cave, including work that does not directly engage with theology. In so doing, I show that the work of Cave studies in understanding this multifaceted artist has, as yet, hardly even begun.

Chapter 1: The Uses of Tradition

“All old truths want a new interpretation, so that they can live on in a new form.” – C.G. Jung¹

“Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.” – Walter Benjamin²

“The themes I deal with... are not easily summed up, and can be approached again and again.” – Nick Cave³

Despite his status as a contemporary rock performer, for vast swathes of his career Nick Cave's engagement with the contemporary state of popular music has been irregular at best. He engages little with his contemporaries in the music business, aside from a few whom he professes to admire and with whom he seeks to collaborate, a list which ranges from, for example, experimental musician Blixa Bargeld to mainstream pop star Kylie Minogue.⁴ While he has recorded a surprising number of cover versions for such a prolific and respected songwriter, they tend to be either covers of artists who have directly influenced him, or songs that are in some way associated with the blues and folk traditions on which he draws.⁵

¹ C.G. Jung, *Letters Volume II*, ed. Gerhard Adler and Aniela Jaffé, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 169.

² Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 391.

³ Simon Reynolds, “Of Misogyny, Murder and Melancholy: Meeting Nick Cave,” *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 51.

⁴ Bargeld, also of industrial band Einstürzende Neubauten, was a key member of the Bad Seeds from 1983 to 2004. Minogue, whom Cave professed to admire greatly, collaborated with him on “Where the Wild Roses Grow.”

⁵ A list of Cave's covers, mostly from live performances, which claims to be authoritative up to 2011, is available at <http://home.iae.nl/users/maes/cave/songs/songscov.html>.

For much of his career, Cave's interest has been more in the (apparently) timeless than the timely.⁶ In a 2008 interview with Phil Sutcliffe, he suggested that at least some of his work operates on an archetypal plane:

The songs get written from a... a higher part of you in some way. Than the average person we are. That I am, at least. Those songs come from a more developed place. In time, maybe, you catch up to that. They seem to speak to you [...] and also the world can change too and suddenly your songs become relevant.⁷

To that end, this chapter will examine Cave's engagement with the archetypal and with the traditions from which he draws; particularly the American folk revival of the early 1960s and the folk and blues traditions from which the revival itself drew inspiration. As will be seen, Cave situates himself against this background as a way of both informing and locating his work. In doing so, he takes a place within various continuing traditions; the musical, the literary, and the theological. As David Brown has argued at length, tradition can be a vehicle for revelation, and so it is for Cave.

The Archetypal

Since the concept of the archetypal is so vital in what follows, it is worth taking some time to explore it. The terms "archetype" and "archetypal," as used in Jungian theory, have passed into common usage⁸ such that a person who knows little or nothing about Jungian depth psychology is likely to have at least some understanding of what these terms denote. Unfortunately, this understanding may well go astray somewhere along the line. Andrew Samuels

⁶ Though, as Chapter 6 will argue, his later work develops more of a quotidian consciousness.

⁷ Phil Sutcliffe, "Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 2," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 196.

⁸ According to the website of the OED, the word "archetype" falls into frequency band 5, suggesting a word "associated with educated discourse" without being seen as especially jargonistic. See <https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-frequency/>.

refers, in his foreword to the collection *Post-Jungian Criticism*, to a conference he attended at which the word “archetypal” was regularly used to refer to characters in films who were seen as stereotypical.⁹ In this context, then “archetypal” seems to be a synonym for “recognisable” or “familiar.” Yet this is, at best, an imprecise and reductive use of the term which assumes that the archetypal consists of repeated rote formulae. In fact, the archetypal is as multifaceted as it is mutable.

In defining what the archetypal is, it is necessary to emphasise the difference between the *archetype* – an unconscious and unrepresentable form which exists solely in the psyche and cannot be recognised in itself – and the *archetypal image* – the manifestation of an archetype as filtered through the personal unconscious. Hence, for instance, the shadow – the repressed, inferior, mostly unconscious side of the personality – is an archetype, while Stevenson’s Mr. Hyde is an archetypal image, a representation of this archetype.¹⁰ Susan Rowland, though a post-Jungian herself, nonetheless criticises those writers (including, at times, Jung himself) who fail to distinguish between these two concepts, and in doing so “postulate a constant human essence free of historical determinism”.¹¹ To confuse the two is to paint the archetypal image as something fixed, divorced from all historical or cultural context.

In fact, in contrast to his reputation as a “mystic” of the numinous,¹² Jung regularly (albeit perhaps not consistently) emphasised historical and cultural specificity in his work. Archetypes may belong to the collective unconscious,

⁹ Andrew Samuels, “Foreword,” *Post-Jungian Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. James S. Baumlin, Tita French Baumlin and George H. Jensen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004), xiv.

¹⁰ See Steven F. Walker’s *Jung and Jungians on Myth*, 37-40, for an exploration of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in relation to the concept of the shadow.

¹¹ Susan Rowland, *C.G. Jung and Literary Theory: The Challenge from Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 2009), 3.

¹² See, for instance, Samuels’s word association experiment, in which students of psychoanalysis seem comprehensively to link Jung with the unscientific and irrational (“Foreword,” viii).

but their articulation can only ever occur through a historical filter. George H. Jensen provides an encapsulation of this principle:

[H]istory is to archetypes as jazz is to melody. We might think that we know the melody to ‘Stormy Weather’ or some other standard until a remarkable jazz artist transforms it. Indeed, one might even argue that what jazz has really taught us is that we can never know the melody; we can, however, be surprised.¹³

One problem with Jensen’s metaphor of melodic interpretation is that much music discourse tends to emphasise an “original” melody, whether it exists on a printed score or in performance (usually recorded), whereas an archetype is not the same kind of entity as an articulation of it through an archetypal image. Nevertheless, the relationship is similar, and the emphasis on constant rearticulation of the same principle is fitting –as will be seen below, this is one function of “cover versions.” Thus the archetypal has the curious quality of being simultaneously universal and specific, perhaps even deeply personal.

Theodor Adorno, though no-one’s idea of a Jungian critic,¹⁴ expressed something surprisingly similar in his “On Lyric Poetry and Society:”

[The lyric poem’s universality is] not the universality of simply communicating what others are unable to communicate. Rather, immersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not

¹³ George H. Jensen, “Introduction: Situating Jung in Contemporary Critical Theory,” *Post-Jungian Criticism: Theory and Practice*, ed. James S. Baumlin, Tita French Baumlin and George H. Jensen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004), 7.

¹⁴ Adorno cautioned Benjamin against too much association with Jung’s concept of archetypes, seeing it as antithetical to the dialectical arc of history concept in which he and Benjamin were invested. See Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-40*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), especially 61-62.

distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. [...] The lyric work hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation.¹⁵

For Adorno, what is unique and subjective about the lyric poem is precisely what makes it universal.¹⁶ Indeed, in line with Adorno's apparent paradox, the development of archetypally-based analysis and criticism has over time come to shift emphasis from the image itself to the perceiver:

The archetypal is a *perspective* defined in terms of its impact, depth, consequence and grip. The archetypal is in the emotional experience of perception and not in a pre-existing list of symbols. [...] Themes, patterns, behaviour, interlace with images and the imaginal, and these then mingle with emotion, instinct and body.¹⁷

This suggests the tantalising, if potentially overwhelming, possibility that *any* image can in fact be archetypal, depending on its interpretation. A particular image might take on striking new life in a particular context, or it may be highly suggestive for the particular individual analysing it. Either way this perception causes it to be archetypal in and through the perceiver's engagement with it. The archetypal thus constitutes an individual revelation.

At this point, however, a major problem arises. Quite simply, while this interpretation of the archetypal may be very exciting for the analyst, where does it leave the critic – adrift on a sea of infinite subjectivity? Can a particular image's archetypal quality be communicated effectively if it relies on the perceiver recognising it as such, or does the discourse become so circular as to be meaningless – essentially, “it is archetypal because I say it is archetypal”?

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” *Notes to Literature Volume I*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 38.

¹⁶ For more on this, and a more sustained engagement with “Lyric Poetry and Society” specifically, see Chapter 5

¹⁷ Andrew Samuels, *Jung and the Post-Jungians* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2002), 53.

In answering this, it is helpful to examine Jungian analysis and literary criticism in light of each other. Jung's approach to analysis tended more, ideally, towards a dialogue, a "dialectical procedure" in which the therapist is "no longer the agent of treatment but a fellow participant in a process of individual development"¹⁸ (though there is still an implicit power dynamic – the patient is not invited to comment on the doctor's possible complexes). Similarly, it should not be difficult to conceive of literary criticism as a dialogue of sorts between author(s) and critic, in which both must give of themselves. In the terms of archetypal criticism, the critic responds to the archetypal in the text, and in doing so exposes the author's deployment of these images, thus translating their own personal response. Writers like Christopher Hauke (in his book *Jung and the Postmodern*) and Rowland have argued strongly for a "marriage" (in Rowland's terms) between Jung's writings and postmodernist and/or poststructuralist theory, and here can be seen a manifestation of just that, where the person of the author vanishes from view to be replaced by the image of the author created by the critic's engagement with them – not dead, but remade.

One pioneer of such archetypal critical practice was Northrop Frye, for whom archetypal criticism took on the role of an underlying framework or structural principle for literature. This approach has the advantage of echoing Jung's description of archetypes as "*a priori* structural forms of the stuff of consciousness."¹⁹ The archetype's relationship to consciousness mirrors its status within the work of literature – as a structural principle which helps to orient the perceiver. While Frye tended to view the archetypal specifically in relation to established mythology (preferring, as Jensen observes, to elide the

¹⁸ C.G. Jung, *Collected Works Volume 16: The Practice of Psychotherapy*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham & Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 8.

¹⁹ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Vintage, 1989), 380.

concept of the collective unconscious²⁰), the point still stands: archetypal criticism can be a way of situating a particular work, of suggesting a framework for the work as well as a lens through which to view it – an excellent definition for critical theory in general, described by Frye as “a conceptual framework which belongs to the critic alone, and yet relates itself to the [work] alone.”²¹ While more contemporary critics of the archetypal, such as Rowland, Christine Gallant and Paul Bishop, have engaged more directly with Jung, the principle has remained similar, in the better class of post-Jungian criticism, at least.²²

It should be emphasised that the literary image is not the same thing as the archetypal image as it arises in, for instance, a dream. The former may originate in the latter, but it is inevitably, in the words of Steven F. Walker, “a product of literary tradition and conscious literary elaboration.”²³ As Paul Muldoon says of his philosophy of poetic composition, in a lecture delivered when he was Oxford Professor of Poetry:

On the one hand I’m arguing for the supremacy of ‘unknowing,’ for the Keatsian model of poet as conduit, channel, the ‘belly’ from which a poem is ventriloquised [...] On the other I’m arguing for the almost total ‘knowing’ of Robert Frost [...] I’m arguing for a synthesis of the idea of the poem pitching itself, has its own ‘silk *intent*,’ like one of those free-standing images with which I began, while the poet not only keeps an eye on but puts a corrective hand on those ‘silken ties.’²⁴

²⁰ Jensen, 6.

²¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1957) 9.

²² As both Samuels (see note 21 below) and Terence Dawson (“Literary Criticism and Archetypal Psychology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*) lament, however, a good deal of contemporary Jungian criticism goes no further than identifying a particular archetypal image, often one which Jung himself wrote about (Mother, Wise Old Man etc.), in a text, without interrogating the purpose or effect of this imagery.

²³ Steven F. Walker, *Jung and the Jungians on Myth: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002) 146.

²⁴ Paul Muldoon, “Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*,” F.W. Bateson Memorial Lecture, *Essays in Criticism* XLVIII.2 (April 1998), 120.

Even if the literary image arises unconsciously, it is subject to conscious control on the part of the writer. This is not by any means to suggest that archetypal concepts cannot be applied to literary imagery; only to emphasise the necessary caution in distinguishing between the two. This also suggests the possibility that an artist may consciously choose to draw on the archetypal as they identify it in their imagery, and hence the critic's identification of this deployment need not be a mere subjective projection.

This kind of dialogic approach is one that is likely to be familiar to the theologian. As David Brown observes, there is a particular kind of hermeneutical approach, beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher, which has at its root an engagement with the text, and its author, through "thorough immersion in the text, for which the best analogue is conversation or dialogue with a friend."²⁵ While the authorial intent strand has been displaced in biblical criticism by the rise of source and form criticism, the concept of complete immersion in the text has remained prominent in the work of theologians and philosophers such as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Ricoeur, often echoing the contemporaneous arguments of New Criticism. According to Brown, however, both share the New Critics' (and much Jungian criticism's) weakness of losing historical engagement, and of making this dialogue with the text "an essentially individual matter," on both ends – critic and text.²⁶ This kind of approach, especially to biblical texts, loses both the historical and literary contexts of the texts, as well as the interpretative tradition to which the critic in the present is inevitably indebted. As a corrective, Brown emphasises a view of tradition "as a staged process, where the steps on the way might be of as intrinsic interest as the beginning or the end."²⁷

²⁵ David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 44.

²⁶ Brown, 50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The Continuum of Tradition

Both Brown and Walker's invocations of tradition open up another way to resolve the infinite subjectivity question. Artists can choose, consciously or otherwise, to engage with various kinds of tradition to inform their art. This kind of allusion self-consciously flirts with the archetypal, but it can only be a true archetypal expression or rearticulation in its own right if it recontextualises and thereby alters the material in question. Hence, for instance, in "Saint Huck" Nick Cave refigures the character of Huckleberry Finn, plunging him into a violent and apparently senseless setting. The listener then recognises the character of Finn, and the engagement with Mark Twain, but also recognises that Cave is thereby invoking what Finn represents – whether that be adventurous youth and vitality, the apparent freedom of a travelling existence, or indeed Southern race relations. Conscious allusion of this kind, which is to be found throughout Cave's work,²⁸ provides the critic with the text as palimpsest, wherein the texts behind the text are clearly marked up, and hence the archetypal associations are already laid out by the writer. The danger for the critic lies in stopping at this point, in identifying the text's archetypal echoes without interrogating them, treating them in "too stately or static a manner."²⁹

Yet this kind of conscious allusion is only one of many ways in which an artist interacts with tradition. To stay with literary tradition, there is also the possibility of unconscious allusion (or, less generously, plagiarism). Cave has admitted to his discovery that the lines "The elms and the poplars/Were turning their backs" (205) from "Loom of the Land" are almost identical to a descriptive passage from *Lolita*.³⁰ Beyond these kinds of direct references, the writer's link to literary tradition is inescapable. This is, as Eliot argued in

²⁸ Most obviously in his refiguring of Biblical figures – John the Baptist in "Mercy," Lazarus in "DIG, LAZARUS, DIG!!!" and the prodigal son's brother in "The Good Son," to name but three.

²⁹ Samuels, "Foreword," xiii.

³⁰ Phil Sutcliffe, "Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 1," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 156.

“Tradition and the Individual Talent,” true insofar as any writer cannot be appreciated in isolation:

His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.³¹

Beyond this critical appraisal, however, the writer, by the mere act of writing, is subsumed into the literary tradition of their home country and chosen language. Even if they choose to reject such traditions, their work still exists in relation to them. As Yeats put it:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria [...] even when the poet seems most himself [...] he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an ideal, something intended, complete.³²

Despite the mystical language, this is a purely practical matter. A writer in, for instance, the English language is necessarily in implicit dialogue with the tradition of writing in English at least, not to say literary tradition more generally – taking in, especially in a western setting, Greek and Latin literature, as well as biblical texts and tradition.

This separation of biblical influence into “texts” and “tradition” is done advisedly. David Brown’s thesis throughout his *Tradition and Imagination* (1999)

³¹ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Volume 2*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP and Faber and Faber Ltd., 2014), 106.

³² W.B. Yeats, “A General Introduction for My Work,” *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 509.

is that the influence of the former has frequently been overstated, especially in post-Enlightenment theology. For Brown, tradition serves a necessary purpose in developing doctrine and the shape of belief, both in its reactivity to the progress of history and changing material and social conditions, and as “the motor that sustains revelation both within Scripture and beyond.”³³ The artist is a key figure in this, both in their present moment and historically, in particular for what Brown terms “imaginative advance,” of which he identifies two sorts:

Most relevant to the notion of tradition is the way in which the artist concerned pulls us beyond where as a community of readers or viewers we now understand ourselves to be, by building upon what we already comprehend but going beyond it. But relevant too is what happens to us in the present as we look back over the centuries, because the effective artist then becomes one who enables us to comprehend very different assumptions and values from our own.³⁴

As with Eliot and Yeats, then, the artist is here figured as part of a continuum, but one with implications beyond the aesthetic, as an elucidator of alternative perspectives. What this means in terms of Cave’s interaction with Christian doctrinal tradition will be taken up in Chapters 2 and 6. Key to understand for now, however, is the way in which tradition functions as a chain that extends revelation out temporally, rendering it mutable and flexible.

Of course, there are many kinds of traditions beyond the literary with which Cave also interacts, most notably folk traditions. Folk traditions claim, or are claimed, to be the repository of the essential wisdom and experiences of a people, expressed through melodies as well of lyrics which may be passed down through the generations. They are, however, continually reinterpreted and rearticulated in a way which fits with the needs of the moment, or indeed

³³ Brown, 1.

³⁴ Ibid, 28.

the personal preferences of intermediaries. In this way, for instance, the American folk revival of the early 1960s was itself a rearticulation of archetypal motifs of authenticity, as New York, the very emblem of urban modernity, became a hub for singers earnestly attempting to re-establish a connection to the traditions of their native land through music largely originating from rural life. At the same time, across the Atlantic Ocean, British and Irish musicians (almost exclusively white) from Lonnie Donegan to Van Morrison³⁵ were discovering the blues records of Muddy Waters and Lead Belly, and attempting to establish their own connection to the apparent authenticity of this mode of expression. A decade or two down the line, both of these refigurings of the work of the folk and blues traditions, with all of their attendant complications, would feed into the work of Nick Cave.

Folk traditions

On the face of it, it seems deeply odd that Nick Cave should engage deeply with music from and about the deep South³⁶ of the USA, a place he did not visit for much of his life and in which he has spent no substantial time. Confronted with this, for instance, Roland Boer seeks to elide the influence of this part of the world on Cave, conceding that “one may trace some of these themes [an engagement with the experience of life in the South] in his work,” but dismissively pointing out that Cave has never lived there.³⁷ What this formulation misses is that Cave does not engage with this part of the world as experiential reality, but as an archetypal space, as experienced through the imagery of folk and blues songs, not to mention the voices of their singers as preserved through collections like Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk*

³⁵ A pairing united for Morrison’s album *The Skiffle Sessions – Live in Belfast 1998*.

³⁶ Capitalised throughout this chapter to indicate its importance as a conceptual space as opposed to a geographical location, or indeed a cardinal direction.

³⁷ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 123.

Music – Cave himself has referred to his created South as “mythical.”³⁸ Hence, for instance, the world of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* is a grotesque, twisted vision of Southern life (read by Jason K. Friedman as a parody of Southern gothic³⁹) bearing absolutely no relation to lived reality, or so one hopes at any rate.

The concept of the South, in some sense, is a major point of origin for much contemporary rock music, thanks to a combination of early rock and roll’s origins there and the aforementioned wave of British blues musicians. Bob Dylan, the great exemplar of the individualistic writer/artist in popular music, has for most of his career been even more obsessed with ideas of Americana than Cave, from his insistence in 1963’s ‘Bob Dylan’s Blues’ that the song, in contrast to “Tin Pan Alley” folk songs, was written “somewhere down in the United States,”⁴⁰ through the careful simulacra of traditional folk songs that make up the 1967 recordings collectively known as “the Basement Tapes”, to his mid-90s cover albums and self-conscious engagement with the blues songs that inspired him on his albums since 1997.

The origin point for this particular obsession, naturally, as for Dylan’s career in general, is the previously mentioned 1960s folk revival. The folk revival, in tandem with much of the popular music that has followed in the footsteps of Dylan and others, was concerned with discovering the real, the authentic. As Greil Marcus puts it:

When Bob Dylan sang [...] he embodied a yearning for peace and home in the midst of noise and upheaval, and in the aesthetic reflection of that embodiment located both peace and home in the purity, the essential

³⁸ Sutcliffe, “Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 1,” 177.

³⁹ Jason K. Friedman, “‘Ah am witness to its authenticity:’ Gothic Style in Postmodern Southern Writing,” *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M.E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Durham: Duke UP, 2007), 207-212.

⁴⁰ Bob Dylan, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, Columbia, 1963.

goodness, of each listener's heart. It was this purity, this glimpse of a democratic oasis unsullied by commerce or greed, that in the late 1950s and early 1960s so many young people began to hear in the blues and ballads first recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, by people mostly from small towns and tiny settlements in the South, a strange and foreign place to most who were now listening – music that seemed the product of no ego but of the inherent genius of a people – the people – people one could embrace and, perhaps, become. It was the sound of another country – a country that, once glimpsed from afar, could be felt within oneself.⁴¹

This interplay between the particular and the universal, the invocation of a state “within oneself,” is an identification of the archetypal. The folk and blues songs mentioned by Marcus became identified as transmitters of something essential, something authentic – an insight into a way of life that was somehow purer.

All of this belies the fact that the traditions being rediscovered and rearticulated by the folk revival were, at least to some extent, constructed. They may have *seemed* “the product of no ego,” but they were in fact mediated by collectors and, later, technicians of all kinds. As Benjamin Filene, in his exhaustive account of the establishment of “roots” music notes, even commercial record companies played their part in the establishment of the folk canon, having no ideological agenda other than amassing “products that could be mass-produced and marketed and pushed into popular culture.”⁴² Even those collectors who sought simply to document, ostensibly at least, invariably brought their own agendas to bear, beginning with Johann Gottfried von Herder's late-eighteenth-century vision of a pure, uncorrupted rural *Volk*, exemplars of artistic authenticity, as differentiated from “the urban ‘rabble in

⁴¹ Greil Marcus, *The Old, Weird America* (New York: Picador, 2011), 20-21.

⁴² Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory & American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 39.

the streets,' corrupted by the artificiality of city life, who 'never sing and rhyme but scream and mutilate.'"⁴³ This continued through Francis James Child's mid-nineteenth-century differentiation between "high" and "low" ballads to the early-twentieth-century American bias which designated a "true" folk song as one originating in Great Britain and "sung by rural, isolated mountain people who were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants."⁴⁴ Even the more apparently open John and Alan Lomax made a stringent distinction on the basis of a song's perceived distance from modernity, thus essentially, if perhaps inadvertently, helping to inaugurate a particular definition of authenticity which would play a substantial part in the development of folk music. These agendas shaped not only which songs were collected, but how they were edited; numerous eighteenth- and nineteenth-century collectors had no problem renovating texts, ironically to make them more "authentic" according to their own standards.⁴⁵

Yet despite all of this, perception still matters, and the agendas of the various intermediaries in the establishment of the folk canon were virtually invisible, certainly to the audiences of the folk revival. For them, these records were neither products that had been put together for their mass-market appeal, nor building blocks in the construction of a specific identity; rather, they were cultural artefacts whose continued existence provided both a window into another time and place, and in itself proof of their veracity and power, as summed up by Marcus above.

As antidotes to the contemporary milieu of Cold War liberal capitalism, moreover, the songs held up by the folk revival were seen as embodying a vision of the world that was fundamentally collective and communitarian:

Whether one hears [Dylan's early songs] ringing true or false, they were pageants of righteousness, and while within these pageants there were

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12.

armies and generations, heroes and villains, nightmares and dreams, there were almost no individuals. There was no room for them in the kind of history these songs were prophesying [...] These songs distilled the values of the folk revival better than any others, and what they said was that, in the face of the objective good that was the Grail of the folk revival, there could be no such thing as subjectivity.⁴⁶

Marcus's pointedly paradoxical use of the word "history" here is telling, since, with the exception of "With God on Our Side," Dylan's early "protest" songs tend to be focused on the present, albeit a present seen through a distanced lens. It is as though, Marcus is suggesting, their place in the archetypal landscape of the folk revival allowed them to present themselves as prophesying an alternative history. On a more fundamental level, though, there is a clear tension here. Dylan, the early exemplar of this communitarian impulse, has throughout his career been held up as an idol of the individual(istic) artist, one who fundamentally follows his own direction (as he would prove in his decisive break with the revival at Newport in 1965). What's more, even at this early stage in his career, he was being promoted fundamentally as an individual, for his writing (his individual genius, in other words), by others, such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, who had likewise become famous as individuals through their voicing of folk tradition.

Andrea Cossu, writing about Dylan's performance of authenticity, refers to this tension as "the fundamental riddle of authenticity," wherein artists in a communitarian tradition emphasised their individuality to distinguish themselves.⁴⁷ Even when, like Seeger, they emphasised their status as a mouthpiece for tradition or the folk process, ultimately they as individuals were still to the fore, even if inadvertently. Seeger was aware of this tension, referring

⁴⁶ Marcus, 29.

⁴⁷ Andrea Cossu, *It Ain't Me, Babe: Bob Dylan and the Performance of Authenticity* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2012), 10.

to himself as a “modern paradox.”⁴⁸ As for Dylan, he has, particularly in recent decades, pointedly inculcated a sense of belonging to a tradition through his recording practices and indeed the wealth of traditional material he has chosen to work with,⁴⁹ even if this sense is, as Cossu notes, “as socially constructed as any other claim about an artist’s image.”⁵⁰

Before returning to Nick Cave, it may be helpful in navigating this difficult interplay between the individual and the collective to examine in some detail one of the great sources of the folk revival, which itself embodies this tension; a foundational text for Dylan and his contemporaries to which Cave too has paid implicit tribute by covering several songs from it:⁵¹ namely, Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

The *Anthology of American Folk Music* is a curious artefact; a collection of recorded folk music celebrated for its insight and authenticity which doubled as a high art collage. Its idiosyncratic liner notes gesture towards placing the recordings in some kind of individual context or narrative by describing each with a mock news bulletin, yet the overall package coheres, in Stephen Fredman’s terms, “by juxtaposition of materials that drew their contextual fringes along with them.”⁵² The idea of both the songs’ and the recordings’ origins was, for revivalists, at least as important as their actual content. Marcus suggests that “[t]he whole bizarre package made the familiar strange, the never known into the forgotten, and the forgotten into a collective memory that teased any single listener’s conscious mind.”⁵³ This notion of “collective

⁴⁸ Filene, 203.

⁴⁹ See particularly 1992’s *Good as You Been to Me* and 1993’s *World Gone Wrong*, both composed entirely of versions of traditional songs.

⁵⁰ Cossu, 145.

⁵¹ “Henry Lee,” “Stackalee” (as “Stagger Lee”), “King Kong Kitchee Kitchee Ki-Me-O” (as “King Kong Kitchee Kitchee Ki-Mi-O”), “John the Revelator.” A performance of “The Butcher Boy” by Bryan Ferry is also referenced numerous times in *The Sick Bag Song*.

⁵² Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2010) 56.

⁵³ Marcus, 93.

memory” in particular underlies much of the reverence which surrounded the *Anthology*. Not only the songs, which themselves referred back to a nebulous and piecemeal past, but the voices of figures such as Blind Lemon Jefferson,⁵⁴ Uncle Dave Macon and the original Carter Family themselves conjured up images of an idealised world for the anthology’s listeners, from its first release in 1952 to the present:

[T]hey spoke not only from the heroic moment of the leftist thirties, but they drew their subject matter from an earlier, more mysterious era that had confronted other primary traumas and ruptures in American culture – slavery, industrialisation, westward expansion, and mass immigration.⁵⁵

Marcus consistently refers to the world of the *Anthology* as “Smithville,” a neat formulation which simultaneously acknowledges Smith’s presence and role as mediator, and the constructed, imaginary nature of the world at issue. The world to which he refers is not a real, “authentic” vision of rural America, but the world which exists on the record, curated by Harry Smith.

The *Anthology* is, in this sense, curiously reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, in its underlying philosophy if not its ultimately unfinished state. As the latter’s translators Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin say:

[I]t was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the “refuse” and “detritus” of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of the “collective,” that was to be the object of study [...] Not conceptual analysis but something like

⁵⁴ In addition to Cave’s numerous covers of songs from the *Anthology*, his own original “Blind Lemon Jefferson” appears on 1985’s *The First-Born is Dead*, the Bad Seeds album most overtly influenced by Southern blues, while he also wrote a short story entitled “Blind Lemon Jefferson” around the same time.

⁵⁵ Fredman, 68.

dream interpretation was the model. The nineteenth century was the collective dream which we, its heirs, were obliged to enter, as patiently and minutely as possible, in order to follow out its ramifications and, finally, awake from it.⁵⁶

Smith's focus is rather narrower than Benjamin's, insofar as he focuses solely on folk art, categorising it by form: "ballads," "social music" and "songs." The notion of the time period under examination as a "collective dream" is, however, even more fitting in this case; where Benjamin's nineteenth century is a conceptual space conjured up by cultural minutiae, Smith's early twentieth century is a hazy, unreal place of folk memory and art.

In this manner, the *Anthology* takes its consciously arbitrary role in the invention of the folk tradition that lay at the root of the revival. It implicitly represents the past as a frame for the present; just as the songs contained within are juxtaposed with each other, the *Anthology* itself derives its significance from its status in the present. Historian Eric Hobsbawm, in defining the term "invented tradition," argues:

The peculiarity of "invented" traditions is that the continuity with [the historic past] is largely factitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition.⁵⁷

The *Anthology* was in the curious position of being both a reference to "old situations" and, as a mechanically reproduced (and reproducible) work of art, inherently amenable to constant repetition. It was a collection of pre-existing materials which re-assembled those materials in a new order in a manner which exposed its own arbitrariness, in deference to Smith's overriding idea of the

⁵⁶ Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, "Translators' Foreword," *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999) ix.

⁵⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983) 2.

underlying rhythm of things, and the consequent “ongoing composition of meaning.”⁵⁸

While the recordings on the anthology were seen as an origin point by subsequent revivalists, they were in fact taking their own part in a continuum of tradition; the authorship of many of them is next to impossible to determine, given the cross-fertilisation of the folk tradition, where one song frequently bleeds into another. In this sense, many of the songs that constituted the *Anthology*, as well as the assemblage itself, constituted archetypal rearticulations of pre-existing material and concepts. They are, in this way, equivalents to the more modern concept of the cover version.

Cover Versions and *Kicking Against the Pricks*

Like the kind of conscious allusion to literary tradition covered previously, a cover version, a rerecording of a song which is recognised as not being the original version, is an active engagement with traditions and antecedents, a way of flagging up closeness or distance (or indeed both simultaneously). A cover version can be a more or less complete transformation (Patti Smith’s “Gloria,”⁵⁹ for instance, bears almost no lyrical relation to the Them original⁶⁰ until halfway through its running time) or be a faithful rendering of the original (a “rendition”, in Dai Griffiths’s terms⁶¹), as in, say, Bryan Ferry’s various covers of Dylan songs, which generally do little more than alter the arrangement of the song.⁶² Either way, it is an articulation of identity, whilst simultaneously being, to some extent, a rearticulation of the song – “Gloria,” for instance, being far more transformative and hence thorough in its rearticulation

⁵⁸ Fredman, 57.

⁵⁹ Patti Smith, *Horses*, Arista, 1975.

⁶⁰ Them, *The Angry Young Them*, Decca, 1965.

⁶¹ Dai Griffiths, ‘Cover Versions and the Sound of Identity in Motion,’ *Popular Music Studies*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002), 52.

⁶² Ferry has covered many Dylan songs over his solo career, but see particularly the 2007 album *Dylan-esque*, a collection of 11 Dylan covers, mainly of Dylan’s 1960s material.

than any of Ferry's covers. The artist covering a song takes their place in a chain of archetypal restatement. Theoretically this chain points back to an original version against which all subsequent versions are measured, but this is not always the case. Many swing and jazz songs in particular passed through the hands of so many interpreters that they could not be associated with a single artist⁶³ – Frank Sinatra's version of "Mack the Knife,"⁶⁴ for instance, namechecks all of the other artists who have covered the song previously,⁶⁵ explicitly suggesting that Sinatra will not add anything, while implicitly placing him in the company of all of these contemporaries and suggesting that his version be judged alongside theirs. A particular version may still be adjudged the standard one, however; Billie Holliday's version of "Strange Fruit,"⁶⁶ for instance, has rendered the song impossible to cover without evoking Holliday. Similarly, John Cale's 1991 cover of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah"⁶⁷ has largely eclipsed Cohen's 1984 original; subsequent covers from Jeff Buckley to Alexandra Burke have almost without exception used the arrangement and lyrics of Cale's version.

The rearticulation which is inherent within the cover version is in itself an archetypal expression; the original transformed in a new context. The song's history, or as much of it as the listener is familiar with, is palimpsestically juxtaposed with the present, with each informing the other. The cover represents what Nathan Wiseman-Trowse has described, talking specifically about Cave, as

⁶³ They do, of course, have specific writers, but the names of songwriters generally carry far less cultural weight than those of artists, except for cases where the two are one.

⁶⁴ Frank Sinatra, *LA is My Lady*, Warner Bros, 1984.

⁶⁵ Though in this specific instance, depending on the observer, the "original" could be considered to be the Brecht/Weill song either in its original German version or a more faithful English translation (such as that covered by Cave in 1994) as opposed to the bowdlerised 1954 translation covered by Sinatra and his contemporaries.

⁶⁶ Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit*, Commodore, 1939.

⁶⁷ Various Artists, *I'm Your Fan*, Eastwest, 1991.

a point (or multiple points) of becoming, a leap into new perspectives on Cave that have little to ground them on close inspection other than archetypal connections that he is choosing to make by each song that he picks to perform or record.⁶⁸

A cover version provides an implicit lens (or lenses) through which to view the artist, whether this be a musical tradition or even a specific figure. Cave's numerous covers of Cohen and Dylan, for instance, bespeak not only an admiration of their work (his cover of Cohen's "Tower of Song," for instance, replaces Hank Williams with Cohen himself as the admired figure who is "a million ["a hundred" in Cohen's version] floors above me"⁶⁹), but a degree of engagement that borders on identification. It is quite common for interviewers to forge a connection between Cave and these two,⁷⁰ and Cave's covers are a way of ensuring that the identification is fresh in the listener's mind. Similarly, he talks a good deal about the artists who influenced him and/or in whom he is interested in interviews, as if to provide ways of reading him. In *The Sick Bag Song*, he relates stories of encounters with Bryan Ferry, Bob Dylan and Johnny Cash, all of whom appear as figures whom Cave (or his narrative persona) has idolised, and serve a specific purpose: Ferry is a cautionary tale about the danger of having a comfortable life with "nothing to write about,"⁷¹ Dylan is a semi-divine object of devotion who appears in Cave's memory only to confer laconic praise, while Cash represents a work ethic so strong that it can temporarily heal him. All of these along with others, including Patti Smith,

⁶⁸ Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, "The Singer and the Song: Nick Cave and the Archetypal Function of the Cover Song," *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 201.

⁶⁹ Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds, *B-Sides and Rarities*, Mute, 2005.

⁷⁰ As, for instance, in Jessamy Calkin, "Let There Be Light," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 115 or Robert Sandall, "Nick Cave: Renaissance Man," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 118. Cave himself has also been known to make the connection, as in Sutcliffe ("Raw and Uncut 1," 174), where he compares his voice to Cohen's; not the highest praise on the face of it, but still an identification.

⁷¹ Nick Cave, *The Sick Bag Song* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016) 28.

“late-period Elvis,” W.H. Auden and Hank Williams are fed into Cave’s “sick bag,”⁷² a repository of influence, but also a grab-bag of the streams which meet in the person of Cave himself in performance. These streams have been displayed by Cave on a number of occasions throughout his career, but nowhere more obviously than on an album released midway through the first decade of that career.

1986’s *Kicking Against the Pricks* was only the third album released by Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds, at a time when Cave’s reputation as a writer had already risen to the point that he was regarded with a kind of careful reverence by the British music press.⁷³ In this context, for the band to release an album composed entirely of other people’s work seems strange, if not a little perverse. Yet it was entirely congruent with the Bad Seeds’ career up to that point; their first single had been a cover of Mac David’s “In the Ghetto,” most associated with Elvis Presley, while their first album, *From Her to Eternity*, began with a cover of Leonard Cohen’s “Avalanche.” Its follow-up, *The First-Born is Dead*, is suffused with Southern blues, from the opener “Tupelo” (named after Elvis’s birthplace and inspired partly by John Lee Hooker’s own “Tupelo”) to “Blind Lemon Jefferson” (named after the famous blues performer; see also note 54 above), taking in a cover of Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan’s “Wanted Man,” albeit one so heavily altered that it appears in Cave’s *Complete Lyrics*, minus the lines taken from the Cash/Dylan original. If that album marked Cave setting out his stall as regards his own invented version of the Deep South, *Pricks* was like a bibliography,⁷⁴ a revelation of his sources.

⁷² *Sick Bag Song*, 27.

⁷³ Mat Snow, in a 1986 interview, implicitly compares Cave to Shakespeare and Beckett at the same time that Cave is gleefully explaining how the vitriolic “Scum” is in fact partly about Snow (46). By Cave’s standards at the period, this is actually quite civil.

⁷⁴ While the timeline is unclear, it is likely that Cave was beginning to write what would become *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, with its own distorted South setting, around this time.

This is not to say, however, that the world of *Pricks* (“Caveville,” to borrow from Marcus) consists entirely of covers of the kinds of songs that could have appeared on Smith’s *Anthology*. For one thing, all of the songs apart from “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well” have credited authors,⁷⁵ as opposed to the more vague and open “Traditional.” What’s more, some of the songs on the album which *sound* as though they date from the distant past, which deal with the material of traditional folk music, actually have far more recent, and chronologically specific, origins; “Long Black Veil” was written by Danny Dill and Marijohn Wilkin in 1959, while the earliest version of “Hey Joe” dates from the 1960s. Here, Cave is playing with notions of the traditional and the traditional-sounding, as will be examined in more detail later. Most strikingly, though, even the traditional-sounding songs are uprooted by the destabilising presence of the Velvet Underground’s “All Tomorrow’s Parties” midway through the album. What had seemed like a collection of post-punk-infused folk and blues covers is suddenly dragged into the realm of modernist art music.

Staying with “All Tomorrow’s Parties” for the present, for a further idea of the incongruity of its placement here, it is worth mentioning that, while Reed is universally credited as the song’s sole writer, its musical arrangement, particularly on the recorded version that appears on *The Velvet Underground and Nico*,⁷⁶ was the work of John Cale. Cale is in fact something of a lesser-acknowledged influence on Cave, and their two careers have intersected directly at a number of points.⁷⁷ Just as Cave moved from Australia to London and then Berlin, following the trail of post-punk, so Cale moved from Wales to London and then New York to study with Aaron Copland and his near-

⁷⁵ So do several of the songs on Smith’s *Anthology*, but the songs on *Pricks* tend not to have prehistories in the same way.

⁷⁶ The Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, Verve, 1967.

⁷⁷ Most obviously a *Songwriters’ Circle* performance in 1999 at which Cale, Cave and Chrissie Hynde performed, and collaborated on, a number of their respective songs.

namesake John Cage. Cale's interest in the experimental, and particularly the use of drone,⁷⁸ marked his work from the Velvet Underground onwards; indeed, between his work with the Velvets and his production of the debut albums of both the Stooges and Patti Smith, Cale has a good claim to being an architect of both punk and post-punk, as well as a major figure in art rock.

The disruptive effect of "All Tomorrow's Parties" comes about not merely out of the material or historical disconnect between Reed and Cale's electric art rock and the acoustic folk and blues from which the rest of the album originates. Rather, there is a philosophical gulf in operation here as well. The perception of the folk tradition, and the songs that constitute it, as being rooted and authentic has already been examined. Moreover, these are, in the main, songs that carry the stamp of a particular time and place; even the Bad Seeds' versions, hanging heavy with distorted electric instruments and recorded between Melbourne and Hansa Studios⁷⁹ in Berlin, tend to cleave to arrangements that recall the Mississippi delta, or Nashville. Even "The Hammer Song," written by the Scottish Alex Harvey and first released in 1972, engages with this tradition in its self-conscious echoing of such songs as "John Henry's Hammer." "All Tomorrow's Parties," on the other hand, disengages itself from any such cultural-geographical specificity; it is high modernist in its insistence on its own artistic autonomy, severed from any social function (in direct contrast to the Smith songs, whose social functions are precisely signposted in the categories into which Smith placed them) except as art.

So how do these apparently opposite poles resolve themselves? The answer is implicit throughout the album: in the person, or the persona, of Nick

⁷⁸ The Bad Seeds' cover of 'All Tomorrow's Parties' contains a good deal of repeated note clusters on guitar in a drone style; something very characteristic of Blixa Bargeld, whose band Einstürzende Neubauten have made a good deal of use of the technique.

⁷⁹ While many dozens of albums have been recorded at Hansa Studios, it lives most in the popular imagination as the recording site for David Bowie's *Heroes*, co-produced by Brian Eno – another archetypal link to art rock.

Cave.⁸⁰ Cave takes the archetypal influence of the deep South and weaves it together with the Warholian art rock of the Velvet Underground. Hence, despite the sheer noise of the Bad Seeds' cover of "All Tomorrow's Parties," it lacks the high art intrusion of Cale's viola, being limited to a more standard (blues-derived) electric rock arrangement of guitars, bass and drums. In spite of the raucous energy of the Bad Seeds, Caveville is a place where different musical traditions coexist happily. *Pricks* is Cave drawing attention to the marriage between delta blues and art rock which the two previous Bad Seeds albums, and indeed the previous material released by the Birthday Party, had been enacting.

Pricks also acts as a kind of sourcebook for a number of Cave's repeated motifs with regard to subject matter. Obsessive love makes itself felt throughout the album, in songs as various as "Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart" and "I'm Gonna Kill That Woman." The aimless drifter who wanders through so many of Cave's songs⁸¹ puts in appearances in "The Singer" and "Hey Joe;" the latter's murderer who flees from the consequences of his act seems particularly familiar, being perhaps a distant relation of the narrators of, for instance, "Up Jumped the Devil" or "When I First Came to Town." And, unsurprisingly for songs from a tradition which, at least by reputation, deals in unvarnished truths of life, the act of murder makes several appearances; the two close cousins "I'm Gonna Kill That Woman" and "Hey Joe" are the obvious examples, but it also lurks in the background of "Long Black Veil." It should not be surprising, then, that of all of Cave's other albums, the one with the most striking and overt relationship to tradition is in fact 1996's *Murder Ballads*.

⁸⁰ This person/persona distinction and tension will be taken up in detail in chapter 4.

⁸¹ See Chapter 4 for more on these figures.

Murder Ballads

Murder Ballads is Cave's clearest attempt to locate his work within a specific genre or categorisation; the very title of the album announces this intention. Where *Pricks* linked traditions together, *Murder Ballads* very specifically locates itself within the folk tradition of the murder ballad. To do so, it links together songs which Cave did not write with ones he did, the former consisting of the traditional "Henry Lee," "Stagger Lee" (both of which appear on the *Smith Anthology*, albeit with different arrangements and lyrics), and Bob Dylan's "Death is Not the End," the only song on the album which is not, in fact, either a ballad or actually about murder. These former two examples, both of which are credited as "Traditional," arranged respectively by Cave and the Bad Seeds, form the historical background against which Cave's own songs stand. This is not dissimilar to something Dylan was doing at the time; as Cossu writes:

Covers of traditional or traditional-sounding material opened the concert [...] Dylan's songs were encapsulated between these songs, strengthening the impression that they, too, belonged to tradition. Some of them, actually, gained new strength from the juxtaposition to the covers Dylan played.⁸²

Cossu's "traditional or traditional-sounding" is a useful distinction, since, as he acknowledges, one of the latter songs was "Long Black Veil," "a country standard that was written to sound like it came from outside of time"⁸³. On a similar level, *Murder Ballads* dissolves the distinction between new and old such that all of the songs take their places in a continuum of tradition. For instance, "Henry Lee," a traditional song in which a woman murders her lover and throws his body in a well, sung as a duet between Cave and P.J. Harvey, has

⁸² Cossu, 162.

⁸³ Cossu, 163.

clear resonance with the Cave-authored “Where the Wild Roses Grow,” a song in which a man murders his lover by a river, sung as a duet between Cave and Kylie Minogue.

The exemplar of Cave’s interaction with tradition on the album is “Stagger Lee,” a version of a song tentatively dated to 1895, which revolves around a character, a specifically African-American folk hero or villain, whose stature grew in the telling of his tale – a mythological figure, in other words, whom John W. Roberts compares to the likes of Billy the Kid or Jesse James, whose mythologised versions far outweigh the actual historical personages in the folk imagination.⁸⁴ In the earliest versions of the song, Stagger Lee (or Stackalee or Stackolee) kills Billy Lyons in a dispute over a stetson hat, before ultimately being captured by the law and punished.⁸⁵ Cave’s version is almost unrecognisable even as a variant on the same story; only Stagger Lee’s name, and his penchant for unnecessary, excessive violence, remain. The version performed by Cave is attributed to one Big Stick, from whom the lyrics were sourced in 1967, though it almost certainly predates him. As with many of the songs on *Pricks*, the arrangement is broadly post-punk, with the main melody carried by the bass guitar and interrupted by percussive stabs of piano, capped off by actual gunshots (attributed to Cave himself in the album’s liner notes) and Blixa Bargeld’s high-pitched scream. Cave himself described the reason for recording the song thus: “there is already a tradition. We’re kinda adding to that”⁸⁶. Yet this raises a question about Cave’s status with regard to that tradition. Simply put, in the Big Stick lyrics at least, Stagger Lee is an archetypal representation of a hustler. As Dan Rose puts it:

⁸⁴ John W. Roberts, “Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea,” *Western Folklore* 23 (1983) 179.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁸⁶ Nick White, “Stagger Lee: NC Interview and List,” *bad-seed.org*, 6 March 2017.

Be he pimp or simple criminal, his [the hustler's] (and he is always male) exploits reflect the assertion and triumph of the oppressed, be they of a minority culture or of lower social status. That Stagger Lee arose from the urban African-American experience is no coincidence. [...] He is the embodiment of the assertion of the self in the face of persistent shame and trauma.⁸⁷

There is something deeply problematic about white, middle-class Australian Nick Cave's insertion of himself into this tradition, not unlike the manner in which the folk revival saw white middle-class East Coasters take over the music of rural, often black musicians. In the relish with which he performs the song, Cave is embodying Stagger Lee, and hence appropriating his cultural heritage. While the Bad Seeds give the song an entirely new musical arrangement, the fact that Cave chooses to use the Big Stick lyrics, rather than writing his own and thereby adding to the tradition, means that the song counts as only a partial rearticulation – the same image, but placed into a new context, in essence.

Elsewhere, however, Cave is significantly more successful at refiguring the murder ballad tradition. To take one major point, it has already been observed that 'Stagger Lee' ends without any retribution coming to the titular figure. Yet the same is true almost across the album. Only the narrators of 'The Curse of Millhaven' and 'O'Malley's Bar' are actually arrested, and neither is executed, within the bounds of the song at least. The closest thing to retributive or punitive justice is Crow Jane's murder of her rapists, an individual act of violent revenge which damages the social order further. Nick Groom observes this, and its stark contrast with the traditional murder ballad, and suggests that the implication is that "justice will be meted out sometime in the future [...]"

⁸⁷ Dan Rose, "In Praise of Flat-Out Meanness: Nick Cave's "Stagger Lee,"" *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 101.

these narratives are still unwinding.”⁸⁸ Yet there is no real reason to make this assumption, since, aside from the two examples already named, none of the murderers on the album are ever caught, nor is there any indication that they may be. Law and order do not await beyond the end of the songs, because, aside from the clueless police “investigating at tremendous cost” in “Song of Joy,” justice is entirely absent from the worlds of these songs. The restoration of justice in this manner would also be the restoration of reason after the apocalyptic outbreak of the irrational⁸⁹ that was the murders themselves, and Cave has no interest in this and every interest in actively denying it.

Adding to the unreason that pervades the album is the question of the motives of the murderers. One of the narrators in “Henry Lee” kills the other out of jealousy. Her counterpart in “Where the Wild Roses Grow” kills to fulfil his own prophecy that “all beauty must die” (251). Loretta in “The Curse of Millhaven” kills out of a twisted misunderstanding of the phrase “All God’s children, they all gotta die” (252) as an injunction rather than a statement of fact. Crow Jane, as already seen, kills in retribution, making her the only one of the album’s murderers with whom a listener is even remotely likely to sympathise. The other murderers’ motives are shadowy at best. The narrator of “Song of Joy,” unreliable as he undoubtedly is, gives no real indication of a motive. Stagger Lee kills purely because he can, and perhaps to demonstrate his power. Richard Slade in “The Kindness of Strangers” presumably kills to silence his rape victim; the same may be true of the narrator of “Lovely Creature,” but there is no direct indication of this. As for the narrator of “O’Malley’s Bar,” he gives a number of indications that he sees himself as some form of angel with “blazing wings” (262), but the best explanation for his actions is probably just that, like Euchrid Eucrow in *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, he was a

⁸⁸ Nick Groom, “Executioner-Style: Nick Cave and the Murder Ballad Tradition,” *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 93.

⁸⁹ For more on the apocalyptic irrational, see Chapter 2.

“blocked pipe” who finally “burst,”⁹⁰ given his insistence on his, apparently marginalised, identity:

I’ve lived in this town for thirty years
And to no one am I a stranger

And I leapt upon the bar
And I shouted down my name

‘Do you know I lived in your street?’ I cried
And he looked at me like I was crazy

‘O,’ he said, ‘I had no idea.’ (262-264)

The cumulative effect of all of this is to imprison the listener in a world where murder occurs out of nowhere, perpetrated out of rage, directed or otherwise, or sheer sadism. It cannot be satisfactorily explained, and can never be explained away. Cave has claimed that his narrative songs end with a moral, even if it is as simple as “one kills the other, and you say it’s not a good thing at the end and move on to the next one.”⁹¹ Yet even this kind of jovially dismissive moral is absent in *Murder Ballads*. This is partly because the songs are, in the main, so deeply subjective,⁹² and Loretta, for instance, is self-evidently incapable of critically examining her own behaviour in any kind of moral framework, but also because to offer a moral would be far more of a resolution than these songs seem capable of providing. To do so would close off the song, thereby depriving it of the terrible power that comes with its lack of resolution or conclusion.

⁹⁰ Nick Cave, “The Flesh Made Word,” *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997) 142.

⁹¹ Debbie Kruger, “Nick Cave: The Songwriter Speaks,” *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011) 142.

⁹² See Chapter 4 for more on the solipsistic subjectivity of many of Cave’s songs.

This resistance to the explicable and to reason may well be what drew Cave to the murder ballad tradition in the first place. The genre almost invariably represents a sudden explosion of apocalyptic violence into the world:

[Traditional murder ballads] are not ballads of some simple black-and-white morality; these are ballads of no morality. [...] [T]he world described by such traditional ballads is unremittingly flesh and bone. There is no redemption. Death is not presented as an escape or transcendence, it is not a form of sacrifice – it is merely a crushing reassertion of the material nature of reality.⁹³

This twins with something that Boer admires about Cave's treatment of death; that he does not "quarantin[e] it from the mundane course of our lives," but rather makes death explosive, brutal and visible.⁹⁴ In doing so, Cave approaches a representation of Giorgio Agamben's "bare life," a state which Leland de la Durantaye defines as "a life shorn of all qualification and conceived of independent of its traditional attributes."⁹⁵ Bare life is by no means a desirable state in itself, but its essence lies, or can lie, in potentiality; it is, in this sense, inherently post-apocalyptic, being a site of seemingly infinite possibility.

Boer suggests that Cave's work in general assumes "not a doctrinaire position [on death], whether religious or materialist, but a realistic position in which we can speak only in image, metaphor and myth."⁹⁶ This yoking together of "realistic" and "myth" might seem, on the face of it, like a contradiction, given the usual usage of myth as connoting unreality. For Boer, however, as for Cave, myth is in fact a way of explicating the real. The human understanding of death (and afterlife) showcases this; in the absence of definite knowledge about

⁹³ Groom, 85.

⁹⁴ Boer, 51.

⁹⁵ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2009), 203.

⁹⁶ Boer, 58.

the cessation of consciousness, myth of one kind or another takes over, whether it be Heaven or spiritualism. But where these are comforting concepts, Cave chooses instead to represent what Boer calls the “horror-inducing annihilation”⁹⁷ of death by means of a Stagger Lee or a Loretta who kills indiscriminately. It is no wonder that some of these figures (the “O’Malley’s Bar” narrator, or, to a lesser extent, Loretta) see themselves as divinely sanctioned. In their own way, they are agents of revelation.

Conclusion

An artistic tradition, whether it be folk art or any aspect of “high” art, is inherently archetypal insofar as it consists of, broadly speaking, a series of variations on a theme (Jensen’s jazz metaphor is again apposite here), or, understood differently, rearticulations of an original revelation. On the one hand, work within the tradition may be a vehicle for archetypal imagery centred on particular themes, as, for instance, in the murder ballad tradition, which deals with concepts of death and retribution in ways that reflect both deep-seated human concerns and socio-cultural specificity. Yet these traditions are also themselves archetypal, insofar as they themselves reflect particular understandings of authenticity, or of art’s relation to society, or any number of other things, and they themselves are subject to rearticulation. Hence the blues tradition as interpreted by, for instance, Rory Gallagher in the 1970s is a very different phenomenon from the blues recorded by the Lomaxes in the 1920s and 30s, or even that tradition as practiced in the 2010s, by an artist like Jack White. The cultural conditions surrounding the tradition, from the involvement of commercial influences in its dissemination to the demographics of its practitioners, have both necessitated and catalysed a metamorphosis.

⁹⁷ Boer, 58.

Thus, by examining how Nick Cave draws on such traditions, one can see the deep vein of the archetypal that runs through his work. By drawing on artistic predecessors from Hooker to Cash to Cale, Cave not only self-consciously frames his own work, but also manages to tap into the same disparate wells of tradition from which they draw. Hence, when he covered Blind Willie Johnson's "John the Revelator" for tributes to the *Smith Anthology* in 1999 and 2001, Cave was both self-consciously making reference to his own status as a writer of the apocalyptic, and to the folk and biblical traditions from which he has drawn throughout his career. As the example of *Murder Ballads* shows, moreover, Cave places his own work alongside and within the traditions from which he draws, suggesting his recognition of himself as an artist continuing those traditions. These traditions provide not only a context in which Cave's work may be situated, but also threads of archetypal imagery and concepts which flow into his own work. Cave as an artist is deeply Romantic and individualistic in his concerns, but, like those folk revival artists who stressed their own individuality within the communitarian tradition,⁹⁸ he uses his status within that tradition to draw on concepts that require rearticulation in the contemporary world, thus taking an active and conscious part in what Brown refers to as "a continuous dynamic of tradition."⁹⁹ In so doing, he becomes a vehicle for continuing revelation.

Throughout this chapter I have dealt with literary and especially musical traditions not only in order to locate Cave's work historically, but also by way of analogy. The rest of this thesis will be concerned with the theological traditions to which his work bears relation, and so it has been necessary to demonstrate Cave's interactions with various forms of tradition; as will be seen in Chapter 6 in particular, Cave's relationship to theological traditions and

⁹⁸ See Chapters 4 and 5 for more on Cave's movement between individualistic and communitarian concerns.

⁹⁹ Brown, 365.

doctrines is complex and protean. Moreover, as the next chapter in particular will demonstrate, literary and theological traditions are often so deeply entwined as to be inseparable.

Chapter 2: Apocalyptic Genealogies

“There is a tradition that is catastrophe.” – Walter Benjamin¹

The eschatology of Nick Cave’s work stands in a curiously liminal position. On the one hand, the railing prophecies of songs like “Tupelo” and “Straight to You” seem to be based in the Biblical sense of apocalypse as revelation of the divinely-attributed eschaton, sometimes in quite literal terms.² Conversely, the likes of “Papa Won’t Leave You, Henry” and “We Call Upon the Author” depict what appear to be entirely earthly catastrophes, in which the divine hand, if it exists, is entirely obscured. These fit, then, into the contemporary sense of “apocalypse” as a sudden disaster which need not be (and often is not) planned. Then there is a song like “Higgs Boson Blues,” a vision quest through a frozen world, which seems, as do many of Cave’s works, to sit somewhere between these two categories. This chapter will examine this state of affairs in more detail in an attempt to place Cave in relation to various aspects of the apocalyptic tradition. It will negotiate between different versions and understandings of the apocalyptic across the centuries: theological, literary and historical, though the three are never any less than inextricable, and any understanding of the apocalyptic suggests a particular position in each of those three categories.

At the outset, the distinction must be made between “apocalyptic” as a broad category, and those works defined as formal “apocalypses.” The former, the subject of this thesis, is derived from the latter (“apocalyptic” refers to

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed, Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 473.

² Roland Boer, for instance, makes much of the flood narratives of “Tupelo” and “The Carny” among others as echoes of Genesis (*Nick Cave*, 34-37).

content that might be found in an apocalypse) and yet the relationship between the two is not necessarily straightforward. It is entirely valid to refer to a work which does not fall under the genre of apocalypse as broadly “apocalyptic,” for instance; most contemporary apocalyptic works are not necessarily apocalypses in a formal sense. The contemporary usage of both terms confuses things still further, since the concepts of divine revelation and vision are entirely absent from visions of the end of civilisation as diverse as, for instance, Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* and Edgar Wright’s film *The World’s End*. In general, this chapter will use the term “apocalypse” to refer to works that adhere to both the revelatory and eschatological classifications, regardless of their chronological origin or relationship to concepts of the divine.

Biblical Apocalyptic

While there is a rich literature of apocalypse in both the Jewish and Christian traditions in the centuries leading up to and following the time of Christ, only two of these apocalypses would become canonical: the Books of Daniel in the Old Testament and Revelation in the New. Revelation in particular was to become the template for Christian apocalypse, which would be so classified by the degree of its resemblance to the eschatology and presentation of that book,³ the word “apocalypse” itself being drawn from the book’s alternative title: “The Apocalypse of St. John.” More precisely, an apocalypse can be defined, according to Bernard McGinn, in terms of “both the manner of revelation to the seer and also the way in which he in turn presents the received message to mankind.”⁴ From this characterisation, it can be easily inferred that apocalypse as a genre thus involves both some species of original divine revelation and the subsequent dissemination of that vision. The Book of Revelation, most

³ John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia 14: Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979), 2.

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979), 5.

obviously, is set out as an account of a lengthy vision experienced by John of Patmos, but the text itself is framed as a letter to “the seven churches which are in Asia” (1:4) and addresses itself directly to its readers; the final verse is “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (22:21).

Nick Cave, it must be said, does not overtly present the content of his work as revelation directly from God. Nor, indeed, can the majority of his works be considered to be true apocalypses in this classical⁵ sense, since they rarely engage on this direct level of revelation. While a species of apocalyptic eschatology is very much at play throughout his work, the form it takes is quite distinct from this classical, Biblical kind.

For a start, there is a specific pattern to the apocalyptic view of history (even if that history, like Dylan’s “history” according to Marcus in the previous chapter, lies in the prophesied future). McGinn, referring to the characteristics of classical apocalypse, refers to a “divinely predetermined pattern of crisis-judgement-vindication that marks the End.”⁶ In other words, the distorted or debased earthly realm (crisis) experiences some manner of powerful and unmistakable divine intervention (judgement), after which harmony is restored (vindication). This classification, which holds true for true apocalypses from Biblical times to the present day, is at best only partially applicable to Cave’s work. His songs wallow in crisis, judgement and destruction, both (super)natural and human, but renewal, or vindication, is striking by its very absence. As seen in the previous chapter, even the sprees of *Murder Ballads* are simply cut off, with little or no indication of what might follow – order is never restored. “Higgs Boson Blues,” with its *Great Gatsby*-referencing final image of Miley Cyrus floating in a swimming pool, ends on either a serene afterimage of

⁵ McGinn uses the term “classical” to denote apocalypses which are roughly contemporary with the two Biblical ones, both canonical and apocryphal (*Visions of the End*, 2).

⁶ Bernard McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1994), 10.

violence, or simply an image of indolence, with no indication of any resulting change. *And the Ass Saw the Angel* provides its apparent moment of vindication midway through the novel, with the birth of Beth and the associated end of years of rain, but this is undercut when the rain recommences near the end of the novel with Beth's death. Only "New Morning" provides anything close to renewal or vindication:

There'll be no sadness
 There'll be no sorrow
 There'll be no road too narrow
 There'll be a new day
 And it's today (159)

In this case, however, the vindication is all that is provided; the narrator sees only that "the moon and the stars/Were the troops that lay conquered" (159). Hence the equation is reversed; the destruction is no more than implied, undermining the song's claim to be a true apocalypse. If anything, it is post-apocalyptic.

Even more damning for Cave's status as a modern writer of apocalypse is his status as a writer at all. Steven Goldsmith argues that one of the primary characteristics of apocalypse as opposed to prophecy is precisely that it is a written form, and one based inherently in "an idea and formal technics of the book" which allows the apocalypse to present itself (or be presented) as a unified, coherent whole⁷. Thus, in the final chapter of Daniel, the prophet is commanded to "shut up the words and seal the book" (12:4), to preserve the purity of his vision; similarly, at the end of Revelation John warns "if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city" (22: 19). Cave,

⁷ Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993), 28.

however, works in primarily performed media. The transmission of his words is, for the most part, oral; while he has published his lyrics in book form, and consistently provided lyrics in his album booklets,⁸ the latter are, as argued in the Introduction, more for the listener's ease and reference than sources in themselves. The former is a more complicated question, since publishing the lyrics like this suggests that one might read them as one would poetry – certainly their textual presentation, adhering for the most part to strict metres and a straight left-hand margin, supports this.⁹ It should be emphasised that, in Cave's case, the printed lyrics are not a direct transcription of what is sung, since there are divergences. To take an example, in both booklet and book, the second line of "Papa Won't Leave You, Henry" is printed as "the wind hung wet around my neck" (187), whereas Cave sings "the *heat* hung wet..." (emphasis mine) in the recorded version, though not the version that appears on *Live Seeds* or other live versions. As an oral performer, then, Cave is as much a prophet as an apocalyptic writer in the strictest sense.

The question of Cave's relationship to the Biblical apocalypse becomes even more fraught when one examines his rather selective interaction with the Bible as a whole. He makes frequent reference to Jesus, yet the Jesus of his work¹⁰ is more the human figure of the Gospels than the more abstracted divine figure of the epistles, or the avenging heavenly prince of Revelation. The "gilled Jesus shivering on a fisherman's hook" glimpsed in "Darker with the Day" (336), for instance, is less an eschatological or messianic hero than an image of passive, pathetic suffering.¹¹ In 1998, Cave wrote an introduction for a new edition of the Gospel of Mark, in which he emphasised the "essential

⁸ A notable exception is 2016's *Skeleton Tree*, whose lyrics have, as a result, not yet been officially published.

⁹ See the Introduction for a demonstration of this, as well as more detail.

¹⁰ Cave alternates between the names "Jesus" and "Christ," tending to use the former to refer to the human figure under discussion here (hence my general preference for the name), while "Christ" is the more abstract, divine figure of "'The Mercy Seat" or "Into My Arms."

¹¹ See the end of Chapter 6 for more exploration of this image.

humanness” of Mark’s Jesus, all “creative sorrow” and “boiling anger” whom he sees as an archetypal image of human potential, his teachings and parables expressions of his “brilliant, jewel-like imagination.”¹² Apart from the Gospels, he shows a good deal of interest in Job, which he frequently quotes or paraphrases – to take one example, the lines “God-damn the day that I was born/The night that forced me from the womb” in “When I First Came to Town” (201) echo Job’s famous speech beginning “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, There is a man child conceived” (Job 3:3).¹³ His *Complete Lyrics* features as its epigraph a repeated quote from the first chapter of the book – “And I only am escaped to tell thee” (Job 1:15-19). Yet the Biblical apocalypses are conspicuously absent from Cave’s work. He has referred to Revelation on occasion, though only in passing;¹⁴ Daniel, not at all. While there are elements of apocalyptic eschatology in the Gospels, these are associated more with the directly prophetic Christ,¹⁵ in whom Cave is less interested. In other words, for all that the general tenor of apocalypse appeals to Cave (the “cruel and rancorous God [of the Old Testament] ... [who] would wipe out entire nations on a whim”¹⁶), he has displayed limited interest in the actual canonical apocalypses themselves.

If Cave’s interaction with the classical tradition of apocalypse is so irregular, then, what is it that makes his work so evidently apocalyptic? The appeal is clearly strong; in a 1997 interview with Stephen Dalton, Cave complains about being repeatedly likened to a “Southern Gothic Preacher” in

¹² Nick Cave, “Introduction,” *The Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), vii.

¹³ See also the similar phrasing of Jeremiah 20:14.

¹⁴ In his introduction to Mark’s Gospel, for instance, where it is described as “chilling” and “sickening” – high praise from Cave.

¹⁵ Matthew 24-5, Mark 13 and Luke 21 are all heavily concerned with such eschatology, directly from the mouth of Christ, but Cave has never engaged with those particular sections of those Gospels directly.

¹⁶ Nick Cave, “The Flesh Made Word,” *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997), 138.

profiles,¹⁷ presumably at least partly as a result of his clear and abiding interest in such figures. Additionally, aside from the present work, Roland Boer's *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* is, as the title would suggest, partly dedicated to this strand of Cave's body of work, while pieces by Robert Eaglestone and John H. Baker on Cave's religious thought more generally make explicit (albeit passing) reference to his apocalyptic rhetoric.¹⁸ To understand this, it is necessary to delve more deeply into those specific strands of eschatology with which Cave's work is suffused.

Revelation and Prophecy

For Cave, revelation is both inherent within and inseparable from the work of art. This is the central subject matter of his radio talk "The Flesh Made Word," in which Cave outlines his concept of revelation through language: "God is a product of a creative imagination, and God is that imagination taken flight" and "[d]ivinity must be given its freedom to flow through us, through language, through communication, through imagination [...] Through us, God finds his voice, for just as we need God, he in turn needs us."¹⁹ A similar sentiment appears in his later lecture "The Secret Life of the Love Song": "I found that through the use of language I was writing God into existence. Language became the blanket that I threw over the invisible man, which gave him shape and form."²⁰ For Cave, the creative act is doubly revelatory: it reveals God and is simultaneously a revelation *from* God, as suggested elsewhere in "The Flesh

¹⁷ Stephen Dalton, "Around 35, the sustained hatred I had for the world dissipated," *Uncut Ultimate Music Guide: Nick Cave* April 2013, 99.

¹⁸ Robert Eaglestone, "From Mutiny to Calling Upon the Author: Cave's Religion," *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 164-177; John H. Baker, "'There is a Kingdom': Nick Cave, Christian Artist?" *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 219-237.

¹⁹ "The Flesh Made Word," 137, 142.

²⁰ Nick Cave, "The Secret Life of the Love Song," *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), 6.

Made Word,” when Cave applies this theory to his own writing for *The Birthday Party*:

[A]ll I had to do was walk onstage and let the curse of God roar through me. [...] To loosely paraphrase William Blake: I myself did nothing; I just pointed a damning finger and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. Though I had no notion of that then, God was talking not just to me but through me, and his breath stank.²¹

This concept of revelation, which elevates the artist to prophetic or even Godlike stature, has more than a faint ring of Gnosticism about it²² – just as the Gnostic who receives knowledge (Gnosis) is thus “transformed through enlightenment into the actual object of knowledge.”²³ Indeed, according to Elaine Pagels:

Like circles of artists today, gnostics considered original creative expression to be the mark of anyone who becomes spiritually alive. Each one, like students of a painter or writer, expected to express his own perceptions by revising and transforming what he was taught.²⁴

The major difference is that Cave’s theological outlook is, to all appearances, self-created, rather than coming from a gnostic teacher. With that said, Cave’s awareness that he is engaging with this school of thought is highlighted by his quoting of the Gnostic apocryphal Gospel of Thomas later in “*The Flesh Made Word*.”²⁵ This kind of theological outlook (also endorsed somewhat by more orthodox theologians, perhaps most obviously in the twentieth century in the field of natural theology) undermines the authority of Scripture, by allowing God’s word to be accessed elsewhere, and indeed for Cave the Bible is sacred

²¹ ‘*The Flesh Made Word*’, 138-9.

²² For more on the role of Gnostic thought in Cave’s work, see Chapter 3 in particular.

²³ Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 41.

²⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Penguin, 1979), 48.

²⁵ ‘*The Flesh Made Word*’, 142.

mainly as a source of inspiration, a well of imagery from which he can, consciously or otherwise, draw. This places Cave in a similar position to the man he paraphrased above, William Blake, who, according to Christopher Rowland, saw himself as being part of the tradition of prophets that included Ezekiel and John of Patmos, and as such used the Bible as “a prophetic springboard, not an object of study.”²⁶

This is by no means where the similarities between Cave and Blake’s theological and artistic outlooks end – for a start, as will be seen, for both artists, the two categories shade inescapably into each other. Cave has, not coincidentally, cited Blake as one of his favourite poets.²⁷ Moreover, in addition to their similar approaches to the use of Biblical material, Cave seems to be drawn, by design, chance or artistic similarity, to the same parts of the Bible that Blake was two centuries previously. Most notably, Cave’s already noted interest in Job mirrors Blake’s, who did a series of illustrations of the book which indicate elements of his own theology – to wit, Job begins the story as a one who lives “by the book,” under a received moral code, before experiencing a series of catastrophes topped off by personal revelation (an apocalyptic vision, in other words), which allows him to reevaluate his life and move forward in the light of this personal experience²⁸. This is remarkably close to Cave’s criticism of traditional religion, and the Pharisees of Jesus’s day, as being preoccupied with “the law in preference to the logos.”²⁹ Indeed, Blake suggests this in his first illustration with a New Testament quote: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Cor 3:6), which is also quoted by Cave in ‘The Flesh Made Word’, immediately following the previous quote in which he mentions Blake by name. Just prior to this, Cave uses the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery to illustrate the former’s creative and hence divine powers,

²⁶ Christopher Rowland, *Blake and the Bible* (London: Yale UP, 2010), 132.

²⁷ Nick Cave, “Issue 25,” *The Red Hand Files*. February 2019. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

²⁸ This analysis is indebted to Chapters 2 and 3 of Rowland’s *Blake and the Bible*.

²⁹ ‘The Flesh Made Word,’ 140.

concentrating particularly on the image of Jesus stooping and writing with his finger on the ground, recalling the watercolour Blake painted of this moment.

These examples demonstrate that Cave has, in his theology, been treading the path already worn by Blake,³⁰ and through this similarity it is possible to discern more clearly the nature of revelation in Cave's work. As already suggested, both artists have a deep antinomian suspicion of religious law, as opposed to direct experience of God, or expression of that experience. In what Christopher Burdon calls "the eternal conflict of law and gospel,"³¹ both Cave and Blake are firmly on the side of gospel. Just as a Blake work like *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* satirises the codifying of religious doctrine in its "Proverbs of Hell," Cave's 'God is in the House' depicts a religious community whose adherence to "firm but fair" (325) doctrine has become stultifying. Three times they are referred to as being "As quiet as a mouse" (324-5), a description which is twice paired with their being "on our knees" in passive submission. The emissaries of this kind of religion, too, come in for scorn, from the "fat cunt behind a screen" of "Mutiny in Heaven" (73) and "that mad old buzzard, the Reverend" in "Papa Won't Leave You, Henry" (187) to "the missionary/With his smallpox and flu" in "Higgs Boson Blues" (515). Blake is even more overt in depicting priests as guardians of overly legalistic religion, such as the "Priests in black gowns"³² of "The Garden of Love," who are themselves an echo of Urizen, an emblem of the confining power of the law, referred to as "the primeval Priest."³³ Then there is his account of the origins of priesthood in Plate 11 of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

³⁰ In the documentary *20,000 Days on Earth*, shots of books piled high in Cave's office pick out, among others, a collection of Blake's complete poetry; the acknowledging of a creative debt.

³¹ Christopher Burdon, *The Apocalypse in England* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 184.

³² William Blake, "The Garden of Love," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 26.

³³ William Blake, "The First Book of Urizen," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 70.

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the genius of each city & country. placing it under its mental deity.

Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus begun Priesthood.

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounced that the Gods had orderd such things.

Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.³⁴

Priests, the guardians of law, are here figured as actively distorting the original spirit of religion by making it abstract and tying it to ordering systems, the force of law. For both Blake and Cave, the force of true religion, of gospel, is diametrically opposed to any form of rationalism or ordering system. This is emphasised by Cave, for instance, in "There is a Kingdom," which locates the presence of God both in "the starry heavens above me" and "the moral law within" (279), a divinity which is experienced directly, rather than through the mediation of interpreters in the form of religious authorities.

It is in this focus on direct experience of the divine that Cave and Blake's theological outlooks dovetail most strikingly and relevantly. For Blake, prophecy was inherently sacred, and he abjured contemporary attempts to interpret Isaiah or Revelation as referring specifically to future events, seeing these attempts as essentially wrongheaded, "as absurd as reading a poem like a

³⁴ William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 38.

railway timetable," in Burdon's phrasing.³⁵ For Blake, prophecy was rooted in a universal spirit, "the Poetic Genius which is every where call'd the Spirit of Prophecy,"³⁶ and hence poets were prophets, just as prophets were poets, and he himself was as much an interpreter of the divine as Ezekiel or Isaiah. He made this overt within his work, subtitling both "America" and "Europe" "A Prophecy;" though both centre around contemporary historical events, they do so in thoroughly abstracted language, rather than the elaborate codifying which some observers, then as now, have seen in Revelation's apparently strict systems. As Jon Mee observes, much of Blake's poetry of the 1790s echoes the language of the prophetic books of the Bible, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation,³⁷ in a manner analogous to Cave's frequent borrowing of both specific phrases and rhetorical features from the Bible.³⁸ Blake's version of prophecy³⁹ is in fact rather close to Cave's concept of revelation through language, the "cloak" referred to above. Indeed, John H. Baker, in examining "The Flesh Made Word," refers to the early Cave as "a sort of Old Testament prophet"⁴⁰ (specifically in reference to the section of the talk quoted above in which Cave mentions Blake). For Cave, language and imagination are mouthpieces for God; what is more, "[t]hrough us, God finds his voice, for just as we need God, he in turn needs us."⁴¹

Both of these conceptions are remarkable for their radical democratisation of the idea of prophecy, which ceases to be the preserve of a

³⁵ Burdon, 181.

³⁶ William Blake, "All Religions are One," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 1.

³⁷ Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992), 21.

³⁸ In addition to the examples already cited, and more to come over the course of this thesis, see Boer 2-3 for analysis of some of Cave's Biblical borrowings.

³⁹ It should be noted that Blake's version of prophecy makes little distinction between speech and writing, and hence is not distinct from apocalypse in the classical sense, in the manner examined above.

⁴⁰ Baker, 225.

⁴¹ 'The Flesh Made Word,' 142.

singular individual visited by God, and comes to lie within the grasp of any given individual. Mee, drawing on Blake's annotations to Thornton's new version of the Lord's Prayer, observes that Blake's view of the Bible was particularly populist insofar as he believed that "Ignorant and Simple Minds Understand it Best,"⁴² and that the King James Bible had become a vital part of the common language.⁴³ That said, with Blake and particularly Cave, there is a sense that they see their own art as a particularly elevated form of prophecy – one might think, for instance, of Blake's loftily independent account of his art in a 1799 letter to his would-be patron The Reverend Dr. John Trusler:

I find more and more that my Style of Designing is a Species by itself. & in this which I send you have been compell'd [sic] by my Genius or Angel to follow where he led if I were to act otherwise it would not fulfil the purpose for which alone I live. which is in conjunction with such men as my friend Cumberland to renew the lost Art of the Greeks⁴⁴

The simultaneous appeal to Blake's own artistic solitude and a prelapsarian idea of classical art suggests that Blake, at least at this point of his career, thought of his own art as particularly inspired. On a similar note, Cave refers to himself in "The Flesh Made Word" as "in evolutionary terms, an advanced version" of his father, whose creative forays were unsuccessful, as well as comparing himself overtly to Jesus by virtue of his artistic status.⁴⁵ Yet there does seem to be a conscious struggle against this impulse. Blake's Preface to *Milton*, perhaps his most famous work in isolation, concerns a communal

⁴² William Blake, "Annotations to Thornton's *The Lord's Prayer, Newly Translated*," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982),

⁴³ Mee, 73.

⁴⁴ William Blake, "To the Rev'd Dr. Trusler," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 701.

⁴⁵ "The Flesh Made Word," 142.

struggle (“Till *we* have built Jerusalem”⁴⁶), and ends with the ironized quote from Numbers “Would to God that all the Lord’s people were prophets” (Num 11: 29). This quote is attributed in its original form to Moses, the Biblical exemplar of law and hence of everything Blake despised about religion, and its quotation here is a signal of precisely the opposite; that “all the Lord’s people” *are* in fact prophets, with the potential for access to the “Poetic Genius” of “All Religions Are One.” As for Cave, almost a decade on from “The Flesh Made Word,” he disavowed the notion that creative expression was the only possible link to divinity: “I think you can get that same link sawing a piece of wood or looking after your children or being an accountant if it’s something that you feel is rewarding to you and elevating”⁴⁷ – though he would go on to refer to God, albeit irreverently, as the divine creative figure of “We Call Upon the Author,” suggesting that the link had not been entirely obscured. This is not a reversal of the concept of revelation through language, especially since Cave begins “The Flesh Made Word” by emphasising community, rather than art, as a medium for this kind of revelation. Rather it is an elevation of individual subjectivity to divine status; what the individual believes to be a divine act is transfigured through that belief into such an act.

A note of caution should be struck at this point, however. This seemingly democratic conception of revelation might suggest a normalising of the concept, whereby the acceptance of divine knowledge becomes everyday and continuous. Yet in practice this is by no means the case in much of Cave’s work. Rather, as will be seen in detail later, the individual who receives revelation is thereby made extraordinary, elect. Karl Barth⁴⁸ viewed revelation, a concept central to his own theology, as fundamentally an *event*, but one which should

⁴⁶ William Blake, “Milton,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erden, revised edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 96; italics mine.

⁴⁷ Debbie Kruger, “The Songwriter Speaks,” *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011) 137.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 4 for more on Cave’s relationship to Barth’s theology, specifically the concept of election.

not be historicised in a particular person or text, given that God is outside of history (though still acting *in* it).⁴⁹ This suggests that revelation, as an encounter with the divine, is also a suspension of history, which elevates the individual, however temporarily, into the “self-transcending circle of knowledge of God.”⁵⁰

Apocalyptic History

“Music [...] allows us to stop time, while we consider how it passes” – Simon Frith⁵¹

This apocalyptic vantage point, from which the course of history is visible, leads into a deterministic approach to history, which is defined by a sense of escalation, crisis and ultimate redemption, of one kind or another. Apocalypse postulates a fixed endpoint to history, to which all else is a prelude: an escalation, or a degeneration (an “unholy evolutionary trajectory,” as in “Abattoir Blues,” in which “everything is dissolving [...] according to plan” (397)). Hence, in “The Mercy Seat,” the throne of God, aligned explicitly with the electric chair, is “a throne from which I’m told/ All history does unfold” (138). Here, death, the moment of ultimate revelation, is itself apocalyptic, and implicitly dovetailed with the end of history; both the narrator’s individual life and the history of humanity have the same endpoint. On a similar note, the protagonists of both Cave’s novels experience what they perceive as a moment of transcendent revelation at the moment of death. Euchrid Eucrow, as he sinks below quicksand (and immediately before being set alight), sees a parade of the dead animals over whom he was “King,” as well as an angel descending upon him (275-6), while Bunny Munro, after being struck by lightning, seems to

⁴⁹ Trevor Hart, “Revelation,” *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 45.

⁵⁰ Hart, 44.

⁵¹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996), 149.

experience both damnation and salvation, first being raped by a demon, then finding himself in an ethereal holiday camp, standing in for Heaven.

This understanding would seem to fit with Barry Brummett's claim that "in any view, the apocalypse is a *moment*; it is sudden, decisive, and quickly finished."⁵² Yet these examples are in fact outliers within Cave's career; more frequently, his characters are caught within stretched out apocalypses that seem to lay waste to time itself. His apocalypses are, as a rule, immanent rather than imminent. *The Proposition*, with its purgatorial landscapes that fill the frame, seemingly stretching out to eternity, carries no specific date, nor, indeed, does *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, which lacks cultural reference points and could conceivably be set at any point in the twentieth century.⁵³ The narrator of "Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?" is trapped within an endless cycle of "going round and around to nowhere" (282). As noted in the last chapter, the grisly careers of murderers like Stagger Lee or the narrator of "Song of Joy" implicitly stretch out beyond the temporal bounds of the songs themselves. The wanderers of, for instance, "Well of Misery" or "When I First Came to Town" have no prospect of deliverance or salvation; in the latter case, the narrator is trapped by his own sins. The destruction of the heavens seems to be localised to a single day in "Messiah Ward," but it is a "long, long day" (391) – perhaps because, in the absence of the sun and moon, the term "day" ceases to have any meaning. "Skeleton Tree" ends with the ambiguous repeated line "And it's all right now," whose evenly distributed emphasis leaves the listener unsure whether what is meant is "it's *all right now*" or "it's all *right now*," suggesting another frozen present.

⁵² Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 44; italics in original.

⁵³ The third-person account of Euchrid's parents' history (22-28) is replete with dates, but no year is given for Euchrid's birth or anything else that might anchor the main narrative chronologically.

As a musician, Cave works in an artistic medium with a very particular relation to temporality, notably in terms of duration. Depending on the medium by which they are listening, the listener to a recorded performance will likely be aware of how long the performance will last, by recourse to sleeve notes or a digital progress bar. Either way, in the majority of popular music, the piece of music proceeds towards a resolution which may or may not be pleasing to the ear. This ending can of course be teased and suggested while being deferred – Dai Griffiths offers a practical example of this: “So often is Bob Dylan’s harmonica an end in itself that he is able to contradict this expectation by withholding the true final verse.”⁵⁴ It may even fade out, leaving the listener with the sense that the music has not so much ended as moved away from them – perhaps even that it continues to exist on another plane to which they no longer have access.⁵⁵ This is not so with a live performance, which gives no indication to the audience as to when it will end. Even a listener closely familiar with the song being performed can be entirely confounded by the addition of extra instrumental passages, or the omission of a verse. Several live performances by the Bad Seeds of “Stagger Lee,” for instance, have included an extra verse, while live performances of “Tupelo” have excluded at least one verse⁵⁶

Not all popular music holds to this conception of tending towards resolution, however. Frith observes that modernist and postmodernist composers have tended to focus more on the continuous musical process, the experience of music in the present.⁵⁷ This influence has entered popular music

⁵⁴ Dai Griffiths, “Three Tributaries of ‘The River,’” *Reading Pop*, ed. Richard Middleton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 193.

⁵⁵ A famous example of this is David Bowie’s *Low*, which fades in rapidly at the beginning of its first track, “Speed of Life,” and fades out at the end of its last, “Subterraneans,” as though the entire album is only temporarily offering itself to the listener.

⁵⁶ An example of the former can be found on the 2007 release *The Abattoir Blues Tour*, while the latter can be heard on the 1993 release *Live Seeds*.

⁵⁷ Frith, 153.

through figures like John Cale⁵⁸ and Brian Eno, and been filtered down to Cave – the Bad Seeds’ cover of “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” for instance, like the Reed/Cale original, admits of little in the way of musical variation and does not so much end as grind to a halt, with instruments rapidly dropping out of the mix. Yet it does end, as does every piece of music. Sean Cubitt may refer to the ending of “Hey Jude” as “a conscious evocation of infinite replicability,”⁵⁹ but it can only ever *be* an evocation – even today, most music is constrained by the temporal limits of physical recording formats, to say nothing of the musicians’ physical exhaustion. Yet, in the case of a recording, the performance is not lost in its end – on the contrary, it is frozen in time, and can be re-experienced from its beginning. The ending is less a departure and more a fulfilment. Like the apocalypse set down in a book, the recording is complete in itself, sealed off from time.

This sense of atemporality can be seen clearly in “Higgs Boson Blues,” a vision quest which is, in form,⁶⁰ the closest thing Cave has written to a classical apocalypse. The song centres around a narrator driving to Geneva (presumably to CERN, given the title’s reference to the “God particle,” recently discovered at the time of its 2013 release), who strays into visions of history. Through this form, the song compresses all of history down to a flat plane such that it can present Robert Johnson, Martin Luther King, Hannah Montana, and the advent of New World colonialism in successive verses all in the present tense:

I see Robert Johnson
 With a ten dollar guitar
 Strapped to his back

⁵⁸ See Chapter 1 for more on Cale, and his relationship to Cave.

⁵⁹ Sean Cubitt, “‘Maybellene’: Meaning and the Listening Subject,” *Reading Pop*, ed. Richard Middleton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 144.

⁶⁰ Specifically, despite its erasure of teleology, the song corresponds to John J. Collins’s category of “historical apocalypse with an otherworldly journey” (*Apocalypse*, 14), a particularly rare category.

I take a room with a view
 Hear a man preaching in a language that's completely new

Look! Here come the missionary
 With his smallpox and flu (513-515)

The only reference to time elapsing comes via a strange simulacrum:

Hannah Montana does the African Savannah
 As the simulated rainy season begins
 She curses the queue at the zoo loos
 And moves on to Amazonia (514)

Even the rainy season exists only in manufactured form, in environments created to resemble disparate and distant parts of the world – geography too is being compressed and collapsed, and the natural world is being mocked and cannibalised. The past (“Can’t remember anything at all” (513)) and future (“Who cares what the future brings?” (513)) have both been obliterated⁶¹, leaving only an endless present in which the narrator spends the whole song driving to Geneva, a destination he never reaches. Near the end of the song comes the ambiguous “Oh let the damn day break” (515), leaving it unclear whether the narrator wishes for time to pass, or to cease to do so. Even the arresting “flame trees” which appear twice in the course of the song (513-14), despite their nuclear echo, are in this context less an image of wanton destruction and more a series of oddly serene torches lighting the narrator’s way.

A revealing complement comes in the form of the less obviously apocalyptic “Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?,” where the eschatological

⁶¹ Aside from some residue of history; a “mummified cat” which recalls ancient Egyptian burial customs, and a “conelike hat” from an unspecified Caliphate, both of which are associated with the prospect of the narrator’s death.

is subsumed onto the level of the personal.⁶² The song centres on the aftermath of a romantic relationship, with the narrator trapped in a blank state, “going round and around to nowhere” (281).⁶³ He is, in a contemporary sense, trapped in a post-apocalyptic state; less a harmonious millennium than a bleached environment of “chemical light” and “antiseptic air” (281-2). The narrator is melancholically fixated on the past; the song begins with the words “I remember” and ends with the desire to return to the past, specifically to “relive” it, rather than changing the events that led to this state of affairs. The future tense is conspicuously absent from the song, and the narrator’s endless, Sisyphean motion around the duckpond suggests an endless present. All of this is suggestive of the concept of messianic time, defined by Giorgio Agamben as “not the end of time, but *the time of the end* [...] the time that contracts itself and begins to end [...] or, if you prefer, the time that remains between time and its end.”⁶⁴ Messianic time is, in essence, the time between the great messianic event (in Christian terms, the resurrection of Christ) and the *parousia*, or second coming. It is examined by Agamben specifically as the timeframe of Paul’s epistles, in the aftermath of the resurrection and in the imminent expectation of the *parousia*. Where this differs from eschatological or apocalyptic timeframes is that messianic time stretches itself out, not towards the *parousia* as a fixed point, but in order to accommodate its possibility. Despite its most common rendering, Agamben returns to the original Greek to define *parousia* as “presence”⁶⁵ – hence the stretching of time is necessitated in order to accommodate the divine presence. This explains the otherwise mystifying apparent presence of the lover in “Nowhere” in what appears to be a song of romantic separation. She is both absent and present – present to the narrator

⁶² For more on this kind of personal apocalypse, and specifically on “Nowhere,” see Chapter 5.

⁶³ This phrasing is repeated in reference to both the narrator and the sun; unlike in “Messiah Ward,” the diurnal cycle remains, but time fails to pass.

⁶⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005), 62.

⁶⁵ Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 70.

even though the relationship has ended. The song is ambiguous as to whether she is physically present, but the question is in fact, in this case, irrelevant – for the narrator, she has become a divine figure, and even her imagined presence can stretch and warp temporality. Not only does the future fade from view, but the past is collapsed into the present:

From the balcony we watched the carnival band

The crack of the drum a little child did scare

I can still feel his tiny fingers pressed in my hand (282)

This kind of temporality is again suggestive of the messianic. According to Agamben, the messianic temporality of Paul's epistles is one of shading between past and present, wherein "the past (the complete) rediscovers actuality and becomes unfulfilled, and the present (the incomplete) acquires a kind of fulfilment."⁶⁶ Time does not come to a standstill, precisely, but it ceases to have any kind of readily recognisable teleology.

On one level, all of this apparent atemporality could align Cave quite comfortably with postmodernity, which Elena Gomel, in discussing the temporal imagination of contemporary science fiction⁶⁷, characterises as being "spellbound by the idea of being perched on the very edge of a universal cataclysm."⁶⁸ Cave's apocalypses more resemble the process of being swept away by the cataclysm, albeit slowed to an impossible crawl, but this too is catered for by Gomel:

The slowed-down, durational time of Christian SF is what Lawrence Langer calls 'traumatic time,' frozen in the perpetual 'now.' Traumatic

⁶⁶ Agamben, *Time That Remains*, 75.

⁶⁷ Particularly the fundamentalist Christian SF series *Left Behind*, which deals with the aftermath of the Rapture and which Gomel describes with wry ambiguity as "interminable" (127).

⁶⁸ Elena Gomel, *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination* (London: Continuum, 2010), 120.

duration is yet another incarnation of the postmodern aesthetics of the dynamic sublime, the sublime of power and violence, which shatters the order of temporality.⁶⁹

Yet this kind of aesthetics of victimhood, drawn from Langer's work on Holocaust narratives⁷⁰, is a difficult fit for Cave's work, even leaving aside the obvious ethical issues. A text like "Higgs Boson Blues" is implicitly caught in a gap in time between trauma and renewal, destruction and fulfilment, but since none of these elements are present in the text as presented, a concept like traumatic duration, which presupposes at least the former pair (as a beginning and end to the timeshape) is problematic. So what else lies behind these elongated apocalypses of Cave's? In answer, a most unlikely apocalyptic prophet presents himself: Walter Benjamin.

As Boer observes, it is a critical truism that Benjamin's work exists at an intersection between theology and dialectical Marxism, the critic's primary job generally being to delineate the two concepts and position themselves.⁷¹ This characterisation is nowhere more true than in his work on history, which, despite his pointed avoidance of teleology, is shot through with eschatology and messianism. Pauline messianic time, as described by Agamben above,⁷² is for Benjamin not a reality, but a goal: he described the aim of his cultural-historical dialectic as being that "the entire past [be] brought into the present as a historical apocatastasis."⁷³ The apparently frozen moment of Cave's apocalypse resembles what Benjamin describes as the historical materialist's conception of the present, less a transitional point between past and future than

⁶⁹ Gomel, 129.

⁷⁰ Lawrence Langer, "Memory's Time: Chronology and Duration in Holocaust Testimonies," *Admitting the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), 13-25.

⁷¹ Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 58.

⁷² Typically for Agamben, Benjamin is cited throughout *The Time That Remains*, with no fewer than 14 listings, two of which span multiple pages, in the book's index (putting him ahead of Abraham and Moses, with 9 each, and just behind Saint Jerome, with 16).

⁷³ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 459.

one wherein “time takes a stand and has come to a standstill,”⁷⁴ and might well be seen as just such an apocatastatis. For such a historian, this frozen moment constitutes the point from which they can “blast open the continuum of history”⁷⁵ – a violence towards the past which would be shared by the lovelorn narrator of “Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?” and the weary one of “Higgs Boson Blues,” were either of them capable of such activity. What’s more, this violence works both ways – the source of the catastrophe in “Babe, You Turn Me On,” in which “all moral sense” and “all rhyme and reason” have vanished, is claimed repeatedly to be “history repeating itself” (408-9). Here Benjamin’s historical dialectic causes the present to be indistinguishable from the past at a specific critical point.

Of course, this frozen moment is as much one of catastrophe as of vacuum, and here too Benjamin’s insights are apposite. He wrote in 1940:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. [...] [I]t is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.⁷⁶

The obvious historical “state of emergency” in which Benjamin wrote this was, as he acknowledges, the tide of fascism that was sweeping Europe, but his suggestion is that forces of oppression, rooted particularly in capital, have given to history a sense of perpetual crisis: “The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are ‘status quo’ is the catastrophe.”⁷⁷ He goes on to define catastrophe as “to have missed the

⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writings Volume 4*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003), 396.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

⁷⁷ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473. Italics in original.

opportunity.”⁷⁸ This is, in a very different context, the “crisis” invoked by McGinn above which precedes judgement and ultimately vindication, which are represented by Benjamin’s “real state of emergency” – social, political and economic revolution. In this conception, the post-revolutionary world, devoid of the crushing forces of capitalism, is a millennial, post-apocalyptic state of being.

All of this could suggest an underlying politically radical potential in Cave’s work (which would likely surprise no-one more than Cave himself). On this understanding, Cave’s work is dramatizing the crisis of late capitalism; an outbreak of apocalyptic energy like “Tupelo” might even be read as a depiction of just the kind of revolution suggested by Benjamin, as the world of Tupelo, Mississippi is rocked by forces beyond its comprehension⁷⁹. It should be noted that despite their agreement on matters of temporality, Cave and Benjamin differ somewhat in terms of their apocalyptic focus. On the scholarly terms, Cave is clearly among the premillennialists, while Benjamin is of the postmillennialists. The latter are focused on the millennium (or period of harmony), which for them precedes the actual apocalyptic event, which lies far in the future, while the former tend to focus on said event, which is expected in the near future with the following millennium almost an afterthought.⁸⁰ Cave, as has been seen, has little or no interest in post-apocalyptic harmony – with the single exception of “New Morning,” his apocalyptic visions are either frozen in catastrophe (“Higgs Boson Blues”) or ongoing when the song ends (“Straight to You,” which is all in the present tense – “the towers of ivory *are* crumbling,” “the chariots of angels *are* colliding” (194-195)). As for Benjamin, while his dialectical process is itself apocalyptic (as both a form of revelation and an eschatological device), its aim is predominantly millennial, and he is vague at

⁷⁸ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 474.

⁷⁹ The revolution in this case is at least partly cultural. “Tupelo” is in part an account of the birth of Elvis Presley, a revolutionary figure in a sense very different to that envisioned by Benjamin.

⁸⁰ See Brummett, 49-52 for more detail.

best regarding how the post-apocalyptic state might be achieved. This serves to make Cave seem rather more radical, in some senses, than Benjamin, pre-millenarianism being associated with a radical discontinuity rather than a progressive improvement.⁸¹

It should be remembered that for all its historical associations with radical groups, apocalyptic content and rhetoric itself is not inherently radical. Goldsmith explores at length how radical millenarianism has historically been subsumed into an established church order, so that the canonising of Revelation, for instance, served as “a means of suppressing social conflict and, more specifically, of containing millenarianism.”⁸² Likewise, Boer observes that elements of the neoconservative Christian right in the United States, no-one’s idea of a marginal group, have a distinctly eschatological dent to their thinking.⁸³ Hence, the mere fact that Cave is representing the eschatological does not *ipso facto* make him radical.

While Goldsmith provides an important counter to the easy impulse to assume that millennial or apocalyptic eschatology must necessarily imply radicalism of some kind when considered politically, it is important to remember that oppressed groups throughout history have in fact taken solace in millennial rhetoric and writing. E.P. Thompson (in a book coincidentally published the same year as Goldsmith’s *Unbuilding Jerusalem*) provides an example of this in discussing the antinomian tradition in which he places Blake; a predominantly working-class (in contemporary terms) milieu which took its position against the structure of church order and Enlightenment conceptions of reason which in fact offered “specious apologetics (‘serpent reasonings’) for a rotten social order based, in the last resort, on violence and material self-

⁸¹ See Mee, 36-37. According to Mee, Blake moves between the two positions.

⁸² Goldsmith, 19.

⁸³ Boer, *Nick Cave*, 123.

interest."⁸⁴ This antinomian resistance, characterised by its opponents as "blasphemous, seditious, insane or apocalyptic fantasy"⁸⁵ serves to challenge the assumption of a number of critics⁸⁶ that apocalypse is necessarily a function that imposes a consolatory order onto chaos. Rather, it can be used precisely to *oppose* questionable conceptions of order, and here, perhaps, we may find some more faint traces of Cave as a revolutionary, albeit more of a theoretical than a directly political one. The idea of Cave as theological revolutionary will be taken up again in Chapter 6.

Apocalyptic Undercurrent

So far, this chapter, in addition to distancing Cave from the tradition of classical apocalypse, has sought to align him at least in part with the diverse figures of William Blake and Walter Benjamin on specific aspects of apocalyptic theology. But could there be something broader that unites a London-based Romantic poet and artist, a German dialectical Marxist of the first half of the twentieth century, and a contemporary Australian writer and rock performer? What is the current running from the former two into the latter? Even aside from the disparate similarities of thought and expression uniting Cave with the other two separately as examined above, there is a distinct, if abstract, principle uniting all three: a sense either of constructing or assimilating to a kind of "alternative intellectual genealogy,"⁸⁷ to use Boer's phrase about Benjamin.

To deconstruct this claim, it will be helpful to examine John Schad's work on writers of what he terms "Christian unreason," which he defines as a reaction against Enlightenment-derived patterns of thought which developed into scientific materialism, and which he identifies with writers as diverse as

⁸⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 109.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

⁸⁶ See Brummett, 31 or Gomel, 131.

⁸⁷ Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 103.

Søren Kierkegaard, Julia Kristeva, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot.⁸⁸ What was unique about this pattern was less its insistence on unreason, and more its resistance to the apparent dominance of reason:

As unbelief became the norm among not only the intellectuals but ‘the masses,’ so Christianity became, in some senses and in some instances, marginal and othered. Christianity’s ancient, inherent disposition of unreason was redoubled by a new, cultural positioning as the other of secular modernity.⁸⁹ It was now – or, rather, now and again – something eccentric, odd, even queer.⁹⁰

This is not quite so simple as a binary opposition between the forces of Christianity and materialism; according to Schad, for the writers who embody it, “Christian unreason is not so much the external other of secular modernity as the internal other of Christian orthodoxy.”⁹¹ Hence the exemplars of Christian unreason are, by and large, working within Christianity as a broad system of faith and thought, but against its authoritarian institutions. It is at this point of opposition to (or, in Schad’s terms, queering of) the established church order that we find Blake once again.

Blake predates the tradition examined by Schad, having died some three decades before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, and two before *The Communist Manifesto*. Yet he so embodies the spirit of this tradition, if not its terms, that it is rather surprising that he receives not a single mention in Schad’s book. The antinomian tradition on which he drew had a long history, as examined by Thompson above, of opposing the recourse to “reason” which was

⁸⁸ John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁸⁹ While Schad’s general point is well taken, his consistent use of the rather broad term “secular modernity” is troubling, which is why I have preferred “scientific materialism.” Given Schad’s focus on Darwin, Marx and Freud as inaugurators of this tradition, this phrase seems rather more apt.

⁹⁰ Schad, 2-3.

⁹¹ Schad, 4.

used to lend the air of natural law to an oppressive social order – indeed, Thompson identifies it specifically as a “*counter-enlightenment*” impulse,⁹² a counter to what would later come to be seen as the predominant course of intellectual history. It was this Pauline opposition, as seen above, between letter and spirit which gave Blake’s religious work its heretical fervour, and his anti-rationalism is perhaps best seen in the role that Newton assumes in his work, associated consistently with a cold, mechanical materialism that limits humanity.

As for Benjamin, his association with the Frankfurt School might seem to be enough to mark him out as being in a similar mould – an intellectual outsider. Certainly, Benjamin’s view of history as perpetual crisis seems like a counter-tradition in itself to the more common liberal conception of historical progress to which it was opposed. Yet there is more to the story, since Benjamin was something of a dissenting figure even within his own intellectual milieu – unlike many of his contemporaries, his suffusion in theological material and the specifics of the Bible slipped over into his mode of analysis, inaugurating his much-criticised messianic trend, and what Adorno criticised as a tendency towards reification⁹³. Indeed, despite his close association with Adorno in particular, Benjamin’s work slips between methodologies (theology, dialectical Marxism, literary studies (including nascent film studies)) and forms (from the sustained early critiques to the later fragments and the collage of the unfinished *Arcades Project*) enough to make him difficult to pin down. Admittedly, Benjamin’s insistence on “the whetted axe of reason” in direct opposition to “madness”⁹⁴ might seem to contradict his placement alongside Blake or Schad’s dissenters, yet this is not all that is at play within his thought. Boer views Benjamin’s reliance on the Bible as an attempt to “reconstruct another history of

⁹² Thompson, xviii; italics in original.

⁹³ See Theodor W. Adorno & Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence 1928-40*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 105-110 in particular.

⁹⁴ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 456.

thought itself," one opposed to the classicist (and hence ultimately Enlightenment) tradition that shaped European intellectual history.⁹⁵ It should not be forgotten, of course, that Benjamin was Jewish, and that it would be inappropriate to cast him as an exemplar of specifically Christian unreason as a result, but his Biblical exegesis and philosophy nonetheless adopt some very similar attitudes.

As for Cave, his work suggests a scepticism towards established churches; quite aside from his reference, in his introduction to Mark's Gospel, to the Anglican church as "the decaf of worship,"⁹⁶ there is little in the way of communitarian worship to be seen. Communities of worship in *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and "God is in the House" are primarily, respectively, threatening hive-minded mobs and self-satisfied authoritarians. "Darker with the Day" and "Brompton Oratory" both feature a narrator who wanders into a church, almost, it seems, by accident; the former "seeking the presence of a God" (336), while the latter ends the song sitting outside and thinking of his lover, having been reminded of her throughout the service. Like Blake, his disdain for organised churches runs to righteous anger:

I'm sickened by what is being done in the name of God these days – that the concept of God has been hijacked by bullies and bigots... and *psychopaths*. And part of this is because they don't have a questioning view of God. [...] Christ talked of these people at his most vehement, and he called them hypocrites and blasphemers.⁹⁷

What is striking here is not only the appeal for a more open faith, but also the referencing of Jesus to support this point of view. Again like Blake, the

⁹⁵ Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 103.

⁹⁶ Cave, "Introduction," viii.

⁹⁷ Barney Hoskyns, "Old Saint Nick," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 152. Italics in original.

suggestion is that the message of Jesus has calcified through becoming doctrine, and needs to be rediscovered.

What is more, Cave's appeal to unreason is both clear and consistent. As early as 1984, he was described by Don Watson as an "ardent irrationalist" in an interview in which an unusually civil, if provocative, Cave refers, for instance, to proudly using swastikas purely for shock value.⁹⁸ The fact that this irrationality has persisted into the late Cave is made clear in *The Sick Bag Song*, wherein Cave refers to "the belief in the absurd"⁹⁹ as being vital to creativity.¹⁰⁰ What is more, this is a specifically *Christian* unreason; Cave contrasts Jesus with "the dull rationalism of those around Him"¹⁰¹ – which, as Cave makes it clear, include his followers as much as the Pharisees. With Jesus being the exemplar of the creative divine force for Cave, this correspondence between unreason and creativity becomes clear.

This irrationality within Cave's work does not merely mirror a counter-tradition; rather, it continues it. Where Schad's book jumps from a nineteenth-century focus rather uncertainly to Joyce, and then, even more erratically, to Derrida, Cave's work stands as proof that the counter-tradition examined by Schad remains alive and well in the contemporary world. In 1930, Jung wrote a piece on *Ulysses*, which he viewed as a reaction to the age that produced it. From what he saw as the novel's coldness and "atrophy of feeling," he inferred "a hideous sentimentality" in its contemporary era, located, for instance, in the rise of popular nationalism up to and around the outbreak of the First World

⁹⁸ Don Watson, "The laws made up to govern everybody shouldn't apply to me," *Uncut Ultimate Music Guide: Nick Cave* April 2013, 45.

⁹⁹ Nick Cave, *The Sick Bag Song* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2016), 20.

¹⁰⁰ Specifically, "resist the belief in the absurd" is one of "the Nine Bedevilments of Advancement," a very Blakean ironical construction which recalls the Proverbs of Hell from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

¹⁰¹ Cave, "Introduction," x.

War.¹⁰² On a similar, if inverted, note, it is not difficult (especially in light of his consistent and thorough engagement with the folk traditions of the previous chapter) to read Cave's insistent irrationality as nothing short of a compensatory force to a contemporary culture which he, like Blake, evidently views as overly rationalistic, in line with that in which Jesus lived – an expression of a counter-tradition, even if it is a self-inaugurated one.

So what does all of this insistent Christian unreason have to do with apocalypse? And what is the significance of this apparent counter-tradition with regard to Cave's work? The answer to both questions is, quite simply, that apocalypse is an expression of this very force of unreason. Just as apocalypse has historically acted as a metaphysical (and, through apocalyptic movements, sociological) response to oppressive socio-political forces, so too it can act as a compensatory or countering force on a more aesthetic level. The Biblical apocalypse, it is true, represents the acting out, the consummation of a divine order, but by this very token, the eschatological represents the intrusion into a secular world of an unexpected disruptive force – an explosion of unreason into an apparently rational world. A society or world no longer structured around belief in an omnipotent divine force is fundamentally disrupted and undermined by the appearance (revelation) of such a force. The appeal of this for Cave, given the attitudes already expressed, is clear, and the greatest proof of this is the ubiquity of eschatological forces of one kind or another throughout his work.

Here it is, then, that the spectre of Cave as a political radical is encountered once more. An unwilling one, it is true; unlike a great many of his contemporaries, he has conspicuously avoided expressing political opinions of any kind throughout his career, apart from his aforementioned critique of the

¹⁰² C.G. Jung, "Ulysses: A Monologue," *Collected Works Volume 15: The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham & Gerhard Adler, trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 122.

political use of religion. The self-satisfied, authoritarian town of “God is in the House,” centred as it is around a church, is the closest his work has ever come to direct socio-political commentary. And yet the fact remains that it advocates for the disruption of contemporary society, even if only on the level of representation. This revolution through revelation is once again in line with Barth, for whom revelation and “the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ” was the central pillar of resistance to earthly hegemonies and attempts at control¹⁰³. Given apocalypse’s legacy as a locus of literary and theological resistance, then, Cave’s work is remarkably, if esoterically, in tune with its genealogy.

Conclusion

In contrast to the traditional view of the apocalyptic, proceeding from the Biblical apocalypse, as suggesting or imposing a divine order to things, Cave’s apocalyptic content is almost invariably a revelation (and the word is used advisedly) of *disorder*. Yet it is this disruptive influence that places him most thoroughly in the apocalyptic line inaugurated in the Judaeo-Christian tradition by dispossessed refugees mourning for their homeland. While Goldsmith is right to caution against automatically equating apocalyptic rhetoric with radical politics, the sustained force of Cave’s apocalyptic writing over the course of four decades is difficult to marry to a particularly moderate agenda or worldview. This is not to say that Cave’s work is in any direct way a call to mount the revolutionary barricades; rather, that the intellectual tradition into which Cave most easily fits is a counter-tradition of Christian unreason. Thompson refers to eighteenth-century Muggletonians (and, implicitly, to Blake) as “highly intellectual disciples of an anti-intellectual doctrine;”¹⁰⁴ an appealing apparent paradox with some applicability to Cave as well, though he would likely (and, as will be seen in Chapter 6, justifiably) balk at the use of the

¹⁰³ Timothy Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, 90.

word “doctrine.” It should not necessarily be assumed that this apparent radicalism can be tracked back to Cave himself, the private self alluded to in the Introduction. In this particular instance, the work elides the apparent apolitical stance of the artist. The irrational apocalypses of Cave, the worlds breaking down unexpectedly, the disruptive reappearances of the divine, are sites of untold radical potential in their depiction of established order being torn down. The following chapters will further establish this by close attention to some specific aspects of the representation and development of Cave’s apocalyptic representations, before Chapter 6 returns to the question of Cave’s position within broadly Christian theological traditions.

Chapter 3: Wild World: Cave's Gnostic Materiality

"The world – insofar as it is absolutely, irreparably profane – is God" – Giorgio Agamben¹

In the appendix to his 1993 work on eschatology, *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben takes on the ontology of the "Irreparable," meaning "that things are just as they are." In so doing, he writes back against theological attempts to define the sacred in opposition to the broken, "profane" nature of the world:

Revelation does not mean revelation of the sacredness of the world, but only revelation of its irreparably profane nature. (The name always and only names things.) Revelation consigns the world to profanation and thingness [...] This is why Protestant theology, which clearly separates the profane world from the divine, is both wrong and right: right because the world has been consigned irrevocably by revelation [by language] to the profane sphere; wrong because it will be saved precisely insofar as it is profane.²

If "sacred" is taken to mean "of God," then profane, positioned as its opposite, might seem to mean "not of God." But as the epigraph to this chapter makes clear, Agamben professes precisely the contrary, suggesting that the profane is less the opposite of the sacred than a manifestation of it. For Agamben, the profane is identified with the world as it is, with materiality. This sacralising approach to the material has particular resonance for the work of Nick Cave in which the natural world is often associated with brutality. The blazing hot

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 90.

² Ibid.

Australian frontier of *The Proposition* and the materially deprived backwater town (plus swampland) of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* both reflect the suffering that their inhabitants both undergo and force upon each other. Elsewhere, heavy rainfall as a destructive force brackets human violence:

It's the rainy season where I'm living
 Death comes leaping out of every doorway
 Wasting you for your money
 For your clothes and for your nothing
 Entire towns being washed away ("Papa Won't Leave You, Henry," 190)

Rain can also be a destructive force in itself, directly opposed to life, as in the apocalyptic fantasy of "Tupelo:"

And the black rain come down
 Water water everywhere
 Where no bird can fly no fish can swim ("Tupelo," 102)

These visions of natural destruction can be seen as either divinely-mandated punishment (potentially the kind of eschatological crisis point seen in the previous chapter), or spontaneous expression of utter chaos. Both interpretations are potentially lent weight by the frequent depiction of the world of Cave's work as being depraved, suffused with sin. The experience of the narrator of "Up Jumped the Devil" is typical of many of Cave's protagonists:³

O no, O no
 Where could I go
 With my hump of trouble and my sack of woe
 To the digs and deserts of Mexico

³ Aside from the previous two examples, see also "When I First Came to Town," "Song of Joy," "O'Malley's Bar," "Papa Won't Leave You, Henry," "Brother My Cup is Empty," "The Curse of Millhaven" for more victims of self-inflicted woe in a broken world.

Where my neck was safe from the lynching rope (142)

This narrator is fleeing from being hunted, and laments his troubles, but is hardly innocent in them – after all, he is being hunted for some manner of crime, though even this he elides blame for by identifying with some nebulous concept of destiny:

O poor heart

I was doomed from the start

Doomed to play the villain's part (141)

It is this intersection of human sin and the sinful nature of the world, which is both formed of and encouraging of sin, that accounts for the profanity of Cave's work, whereby sin is inescapable. Throughout this chapter, this complex of sinfulness will be referred to as "depravity."

This chapter will examine the theological character of Cave's sinful, depraved, profane worlds. It will begin by examining how the kind of doctrine of depravity, of separating out the sacred and the profane, that Agamben rejects above is insufficient for Cave's work. It will go on to examine what I believe to be a far more fruitful theological framework for Cave's work: Gnosticism. It is important to note that Gnosticism is, as will be examined, a wide field covering many centuries, and so Cave will be located historically within that field. Moreover, a full account of Cave's relationship with Gnosticism would require a thesis to itself, and so this chapter must confine itself to a particular Gnostic subject: the state of the fallen material world. A thorough account of Cave's many theological intersections with Gnostic material is, however, very much to be hoped for in the future.

Depravity

Roland Boer puts forward a version of the Calvinist doctrine of “total depravity” as an organising principle for examining the fallen world of Cave’s work. He frames it as such:

I understand the notion of total depravity in a distinctly Calvinist sense: since we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we are utterly and totally depraved and damned [...] We can do nothing good or worthwhile on our own, let alone take any steps towards our own salvation. For that we need God and his grace, which comes to us in our depravity and the recognition thereof.⁴

An aspect of total depravity crucial to the argument that follows is that it positions God as external to the world. The material world in which humanity finds itself by virtue of original sin stands opposed to the perfect heavenly kingdom of God. Boer’s argument, moreover, is that the state of sinfulness inherent to the doctrine of total depravity extends outwards from Cave’s characters to their surroundings, such that the world is, in a very real sense, shaped by sin. In *The Proposition*, for instance, Boer argues that the harsh, unforgiving environment of the Australian frontier dovetails with the brutality of the characters to create a world of “utter sinfulness and degeneracy.”⁵

This approach, however, is far from all-encompassing. Firstly, Boer’s focus for the chapter of his book which makes use of the doctrine of total depravity is on Cave’s literary output aside from his music. In practice, however, the chapter is mainly dedicated to *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. At times Boer’s focus shifts to *The Death of Bunny Munro*, and he occasionally gestures towards *The Proposition* or one of Cave’s short plays, but only ever to shore up a point founded in *Ass*. This suggests that while total depravity may be a good

⁴ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death & Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 17.

⁵ Boer, 19.

approach to take for *Ass*, it is a rather more limited tool when approaching the rest of Cave's output, as suggested by the fact that Boer leaves out the vast majority of his output: his songs. Moreover, as Boer admits,⁶ the worlds Cave creates do tend to offer at least a glimmer of a kind of redemption precluded by a doctrine of total depravity. Bunny Munro, for instance, experiences a vision of all those he has wronged in the moments before his death, asking them to forgive him, which they do (272-273). Both Bunny and Euchrid Eucrow experience fiery demises – the former struck by lightning, the latter set alight by vengeful townsfolk as he sinks in the swamp. In a deleted scene from the documentary *20,000 Days on Earth*, Cave's therapist asks if both protagonists thereby experience a kind of absolution, to which Cave responds "Maybe." This kind of redemption or absolution stands in stark contrast to a Calvinist idea of predestination; both Bunny and Euchrid die without going through any kind of repentance or penance for their many sins.

While agreeing with Boer that a kind of depravity is in evidence in much of Cave's work, I have found a broadly Gnostic viewpoint to be a far better fit for Cave's work than Calvinist total depravity. This identification was first made, though not developed, by John H. Baker, who notes that both the young Cave's view of the Old Testament God as "a cruel and rancorous God"⁷ and the older Cave's radical inwardness are redolent of Gnosticism.⁸ A Gnostic viewpoint allows for the possibility that while the material world is fallen and depraved, it still contains a divine spark. The swampland in *Ass*, for instance, is regarded with particular disgust and terror by the town's inhabitants:

At the school the Ukulite elders would hammer the heads of the children, with a fervour wrought of utter conviction, telling them that it

⁶ Boer, 31.

⁷ Nick Cave, "The Flesh Made Word," *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997), 138.

⁸ John H. Baker, "'There is a Kingdom: Nick Cave, Christian Artist?'" *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 224.

was a diabolic macula on Zion and that within its bounds roamed all the infernal evils of the world. (33)

Yet the swampland becomes Euchrid's sanctuary (and ultimately the place of his potentially redemptive death) after he experiences an angelic visitation there (34). Like with Bunny's vision of mass forgiveness, regardless of the ontological reality of this event, the fact that Cave chooses to present it lends a sense of heavenly or divine presence to the world of the novel. It is this combination of the divine and the depraved which makes Cave's work particularly Gnostic.

The Gnostic Spirit

Gnosticism is an umbrella term which describes a number of divergent theologies, but is most associated with some influential Christian heresies from about the second to the fourth century CE. Though known for centuries from the evidence of orthodox Christian bishops who opposed them (particularly Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*, written circa 180 CE), primary sources for these were almost unknown until the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Corpus in 1945, which contained a number of Gnostic texts from this time period, most likely hidden to avoid burning. What unites Gnostic philosophies into something that looks like a coherent movement is the Platonic belief that the material world is ultimately illusory and conceals a purely spiritual reality; as David Christie-Murray puts it, "that since God is good and the material world is evil, he cannot have created it."⁹ As this suggests, most Gnostics identify the spiritual reality, often known as the Pleroma, with the true living God. Christian Gnostics believe that Jesus's purpose on earth was to spread knowledge (Gnosis) by which the individual may come to know the Pleromatic. Giovanni Filoramo writes that Gnosis:

⁹ David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (London: New English Library, 1976), 21.

indicate[s] a form of meta-rational knowledge, which is the gift of the divinity and has in it the power to save the one who achieves it. It enables one to take possession of the keys to the cosmic mystery, to solve the enigma of the universe by absorbing the *axis mundi*, or world axis, or archaic cosmogonies into the very essence of one's being.¹⁰

One of the key distinctions between Gnostic theology and (for instance) Calvinist, then, is that the individual is not abject in the face of God, but is empowered and in fact made at least partially divine. This has distinct resonances with Cave's work, as will be seen in Chapters 4 and 5.

The teachings of various Gnostic mystics, most notably Irenaeus's nemesis Valentinus, spread throughout the Christian world up to about the fourth century CE (the probable time of the burying of the Nag Hammadi texts), at which point the orthodox church, post-Constantine, had enough institutional power to be able to stamp out heresy efficiently. Yet even after this point, though actual Gnostic texts were almost unknown until the middle of the last century, the ideas that fuelled Gnosticism proved resilient. Manicheanism, whose system of dualism was to prove an influential paradigm for many (Filoramo identifies it with Hegel, for instance,¹¹ while Tobias Churton tentatively locates Augustine's concept of depravity in his youthful Manicheanism¹²) developed out of Gnosticism, and develops its oppositional viewpoint from Gnostic concepts of the essential opposition between spirit and matter.¹³ Churton identifies the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Cathars as medieval Gnostics at some length.¹⁴ Gnostic currents have also been identified in the thought and mythology of the 15th-century alchemist Jacob Böhme,¹⁵ who

¹⁰ Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 39.

¹¹ Filoramo, xv.

¹² Tobias Churton, *The Gnostics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 62.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Churton, 74-75.

¹⁵ Filoramo, xvi.

was to be a profound influence on Goethe, Hegel, and Jung, among others. Jung, a lifelong enthusiast for Gnostic ideas, was friends with Gilles Quispel, a scholar of Gnosticism who acquired and translated one of the codices (now known as the “Jung Codex”) from Nag Hammadi with help from Jung’s Bollingen Foundation.¹⁶ In his autobiography, Jung identified Gnosticism as the beginning of an “intellectual chain” which also took in alchemy and led ultimately to his own depth psychology.¹⁷ This chain of Gnostic ideas functions as precisely the kind of alternative intellectual genealogy identified in Chapter 2; a repressed Other to orthodox Christianity.

Moreover, this genealogy intersects with that examined in the last chapter, Schad’s writers of Christian unreason. Elaine Pagels positions Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, the writers from whom Schad begins his argument,¹⁸ in a similar place at the edge of orthodoxy to the Gnostics, though she avoids directly identifying them with Gnosticism.¹⁹ No such fastidiousness, however, is necessary for Blake, referred to by Churton as “a gnostic prophet of the Modern Age,”²⁰ and acknowledged even by more sober critics as embodying a strain of Gnosticism that makes itself felt in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. E.P. Thompson writes that Gnostic mythology prefigures Blake’s spiritual dualism, and that Blake’s contemporary Crabb Robinson recognised specifically his ideas of the nature of creation as Gnostic:

Blake had told him that ‘Nature is in the work of the Devil.’ When Crabb Robinson objected (in the authority of Genesis) that ‘God created the Heaven & the Earth ... I was triumphantly told that this God was not

¹⁶ Churton, 15.

¹⁷ C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 231.

¹⁸ John Schad, *Queer Fish* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 1.

¹⁹ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Penguin, 1979), 153.

²⁰ Churton, 134.

Jehovah, but the Elohim, & the doctrine of the Gnostics repeated with sufficient consistency to silence one so unlearned as myself.’²¹

Though Blake could not have read the Nag Hammadi texts, he is undoubtedly part of the Gnostic genealogy already traced. Thompson identifies Böhme as a source whom Blake is known to have read closely, and from whom Blake may have derived any Gnostic notions,²² while Churton quotes a personal interview with poet and Blake scholar Kathleen Raine, who goes much further:

[Blake’s sources] proved not to be a whole lot of dubious occult writers but proved essentially to be the NeoPlatonists, the Gnostics, the Alchemical tradition [...] Blake had also read the *Hermetica*, Thomas Taylor the Platonist – the translator of Plato and Plotinus. All Blake’s so-called system was built up on very well grounded, and usually very respectable knowledge of the excluded tradition.²³

Given the closeness between Blake and Cave’s theological outlooks traced in the last chapter, and Blake’s status as an acknowledged source for Cave (as Böhme was for Blake), it is entirely rational to then trace this tradition forward to Cave.

As noted in the last chapter, that Cave is aware of a Gnostic current of thought in his work is undeniable, given that he quotes the Gospel of Thomas, one of the works in the Nag Hammadi Corpus (thought by some scholars to contain material contemporary to, or even older than, the four canonical Gospels²⁴) in “The Flesh Made Word,” his clearest expression of his own conscious theology:

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus states that the Kingdom is inside of you and it is outside of you. This statement must have terrified early

²¹ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ Churton, 144.

²⁴ Pagels, 16.

Christian ministry, as it rendered them obsolete: why do we need the Church to bring us close to God when he already lives within us? And hence, the Nicene Council's decision not to allow it into the New Testament canon.²⁵

Here Cave demonstrates not only an awareness of how far his thinking departs from Christian orthodoxy, a subject to be examined further in Chapter 6, but an unusual measure of historical consciousness regarding the provenance of his ideas – such specific references to early church history are, perhaps unsurprisingly, rare in his oeuvre or interviews. Given that he also references Blake by name earlier in the same talk,²⁶ the fact that the genealogy of Gnosticism has influenced his theology to some extent is difficult to avoid. If anything, the Gnostic connection is more direct and easier to trace for Cave than for a writer like Blake, since he has demonstrably read at least one of the Nag Hammadi texts.

Cave's Gnosticism

Like Blake, though not to the same extent, dualism is a recurring concern in much of Cave's work. Will Self, in his introduction to Cave's *Complete Lyrics*, refers to "the great Manichean divide that rives the Cave worldview."²⁷ Cave frequently pairs the concepts of good and evil together in a way that reinforces not only their opposition but their closeness and codependence:

My good hand tattooed E.V.I.L.
Across its brother's fist ("The Mercy Seat," 138)

The good son has sat and often wept

²⁵"The Flesh Made Word," 142.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷ Will Self, "Foreword," *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), xi.

Beneath a malign star by which he's kept
 And the night-time in which he's wrapped
 Speaks of good and speaks of evil ("The Good Son," 169)

I found God and all His Devils inside her
 [...]

 So completely filled with light she was
 Her shadow fanged and hairy and mad ("Do You Love Me?," 215)

Along with these overt examples, there is a frequent sense of corruption in Cave's work, of something evil or sinful taking over something good or pure. This can be seen, for instance, in Euchrid's interactions with the child Beth in *Ass*, in which his voyeuristic spying inadvertently causes her, the beloved miracle child of the town, to become fascinated with him, the outcast, believing him to be a manifestation of God. Loretta in "The Curse of Millhaven" is an apparently sweet child who reveals herself to have been a murderer all along, pointedly inverting the listener's sense of her:

Yes, it is I, Lottie, the Curse of Millhaven
 I've struck horror in the heart of this town
 Like my eyes ain't green and my hair ain't yellow
 It's more like the other way around (253)

In Cave's worlds, good and evil are inseparable from one another. As he puts it in "The Secret Life of the Love Song:" "goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil – the enduring metaphor of Christ crucified between two criminals comes to mind here."²⁸

This latter point suggests at least a degree of reconciliation, and indeed what is most Gnostic about Cave is that he is not content to allow these

²⁸ Nick Cave, "The Secret Life of the Love Song," *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), 8.

dualisms to remain permanently antagonistic. The most revealing of these pairings comes in "Darker with the Day:"

Back on the street I saw a great big smiling sun

It was a Good day and an Evil day and all was bright and new (337)

Here the world stands revealed afresh: both good and evil. This is the clearest demonstration of why total depravity is insufficient for evaluating Cave. The world of his work is not fully evil; rather, in Gnostic terms, it retains a divine spark. This is a notion made explicit in "There is a Kingdom:"

All the world's darkness can't swallow up

A single spark (279)

This "single spark" not only coexists with the "world's darkness," it is inherent within it. The divine world, the Pleroma, stands revealed through the conquering of dualities. For the Gnostics, unlike for orthodox Christianity, evil is not opposed to God, but rather "originates in the very bosom of the divinity, in the universe, in the Pleroma, the world of plenitude and divine perfection."²⁹ That good can be found in the wretched, the squalid, and the depraved is no more than a revelation of the nature of God as the ultimate source of both good and evil. This squares not only with Cave's rhetorical question "How can the imagination, or for that matter God, be moral?,"³⁰ but with a song like "Loom of the Land." In this song, the narrator and his lover walk in "the dirty end of winter" (205) in the bitter cold, shunned even by nature ("the elms and the poplars/Were turning their backs" (205)), across "endless sands" (206). The picture of a hellish landscape is completed when they pass "Reprobate Fields," a location for the damned. And yet:

And I saw that the world

²⁹ Filoramo, 56.

³⁰ "The Flesh Made Word," 140

Was all blessed and bright
 And Sally breathed softly
 In the majestic night (205)

The narrator, walking alone with his lover with “a knife in his jeans,” (205) may even be nursing murderous thoughts,³¹ yet he recognises the world around him to be not only beautiful, but specifically “blessed.” Neither individual evil nor the fallen state of the world obscure glimpses of the divine; on the contrary, very often in Cave’s work, the places of greatest sin and degradation are precisely where God is to be found.

The existence of the divine spark in Gnostic theology should not necessarily suggest direct divine influence upon the world. Many Gnostics identify another, lesser deity, the Demiurge (sometimes called Ialdabaoth), with the material universe, a figure variously depicted as cruel, vain, or indifferent, and sometimes associated with the God of the Old Testament. According to some of the more elaborate Valentinian³² mythology, the Demiurge did not create matter, but came into existence at the same time as it, and from it formed the world.³³ Blake’s Urizen, the fallen form of Reason who usurps humanity’s worship, is a version of the Demiurge. Churton also suggests Frankenstein, as a figure who interposes himself into the act of creation, as a demiurge.³⁴ No such obvious figure appears in Cave’s canon, but there are still strong echoes of this aspect of Gnostic theology. “Mutiny in Heaven” confronts the listener with a vision of paradise which is thoroughly corrupted and depraved, overrun with

³¹ “Lovely Creature,” two albums later, is a revisitation of this subject matter in which the narrator murders his lover while out walking.

³² I.e. deriving from followers of Valentinus. Valentinianism is distinguished from other contemporary forms of Gnosticism by its focus on the material world as derived from the passions of Sophia (see below) and its resultant relative monism.

³³ Filoramo, 80.

³⁴ Churton, 139.

rats and a haven of suffering. Yet as the song goes on, this heavenly kingdom is identified with the earthly church and religious ritual:

Ah wassa born...
And Lord shakin, even then was dumpt into some icy font
like some great stinky unclean!
From slum-church to slum-church, ah spilt mah heart
To some fat cunt behind a screen...
Evil poppin eye presst up to the opening (73)

This antinomian identification of a rotten religious order opens up the possibility that the heaven seen here is no more than the Demiurge's mockery of the real heavenly kingdom. Certainly this is subject matter that recurs elsewhere in Cave's work, specifically in *Ass*. In the second half of the book, after the deaths of his parents, Euchrid turns the shack in which he lives into a makeshift fortress of corrugated iron, by (he believes) the direct command of God, named Doghead:

Doghead. Mah fortress of refuge. Mah Kingdom by appointment.
Unner command by Him - The Great Preserver and Righter of Wrongs.
(182)

Nathan Wiseman-Trowse has suggested that Doghead, with its pun on "Godhead," is an earthly mockery of God's kingdom.³⁵ This is evidenced, for instance, by Euchrid's narration's habitual capitalisation of "Kingdom," as well as the manner in which he frames the vision of the animals who have lived in Doghead which he has immediately preceding his death:

³⁵ Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, "Oedipus Wrecks: Cave and the Presley Myth," *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 190.

And there, look, coming up behind, mah loyal subjects, mah beasts! See the parade of innocents, winged brute creation,³⁶ marching across the firmament to await the advent of their King. See them all falling into their ranks. (276)

The overall eschatological tone, the reference to “creation,” the animals’ placement in “the firmament,” the focus on divine order (“falling into their ranks”) – all of these place Eucharid as divinely-mandated ruler. Yet he is always clear, as seen above, that he is acting by the command of God, making him something of an intermediary between the world and the divine, albeit one who refers to himself in quasi-divine terms – a demiurge, in fact.

At first glance, “The Flesh Made Word” suggests that Cave might go along with the frequent Gnostic identification of the Demiurge with the God of the Old Testament. This is particularly clear in his framing of the Book of Job:³⁷

I loved to read the Book of Job and marvel over the vain, distrustful God who turned the life of his perfect and upright servant into a living hell. Job's friend Eliphaz observed: "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward." And those words seemed to my horrid little mind about right. And why wouldn't man be born into trouble, living under the tyranny of such a God?³⁸

As noted above, this is the material that led Baker to identify Cave’s worldview as “in some ways Gnostic.”³⁹ Certainly all of this sounds very much like a proud, cruel demiurge – “vain, distrustful,” “tyranny,” “a pitiful humanity suffering under a despotic God.”⁴⁰ Yet this identification does not fit perfectly.

³⁶ “Brute creation” is one of many memorable phrases from *Ass* which recurs in one of Cave’s songs of the 80s, specifically “The Carny,” further evidence that treating Cave’s novels entirely separately to his musical output is inadvisable.

³⁷ See Chapter 2 for more on Cave’s relationship to Job.

³⁸ “The Flesh Made Word,” 138.

³⁹ Baker, 224.

⁴⁰ “The Flesh Made Word,” 138.

Cave does not deny the name of God to the deity of the Old Testament, though he does go on to identify Christ as a progression: "In creating his Son, God the Father had evolved, he had moved on."⁴¹ Moreover, he claims to have gotten creative inspiration, which throughout the talk he identifies with God, from the very brutality of the Old Testament: "Though I had no notion of that then, God was talking not just to me but through me, and his breath stank."⁴² This is, however, entirely commensurate with Valentinian theology. According to Filoramo:

In the perspective of the Valentinian history of salvation, the phase of the Old Testament dispensation represents the psychic moment in which the plan of salvation is still transmitted to humanity indirectly, through images and symbols, a phase that will be replaced by the coming of Jesus which will institute the beginning of the pneumatic dispensation.⁴³

This tracks not only with Cave's focus on the Old Testament as a source of creative inspiration, in image as well as language, but also the view of divine development as progress suggested by his use of the language of evolution to describe the Trinitarian Father-Son relationship, as well as the relationship between the Testaments.

It should also be noted that, particularly in Valentinian accounts, the Demiurge is not fully evil, nor fully fallen. He arises as an emanation of Sophia Achamoth, a manifestation outside the Pleroma of a Pleromatic being, who inadvertently produces matter before returning to the Pleroma, in some accounts thanks to the intervention of Christ.⁴⁴ It is as a result of this Pleromatic origin that the world contains its divine spark. The Demiurge, having come from a Pleromatic being, likewise contains some small amount of divinity;

⁴¹ Ibid., 140.

⁴² Ibid., 138.

⁴³ Filoramo, 118-119.

⁴⁴ See Filoramo, 75-76; 81.

according to one Valentinian author, he was formed to be a representation of God, and hence “is equipped with every name and every glorious quality and property as a copy of the heavenly Father.”⁴⁵ The concept of the divine spark thus permeates every aspect of the Gnostic world from top to bottom. Nothing is fully forsaken or fallen.

The Proposition

Of all of Cave’s work, perhaps the strongest case against the idea of the divine spark world is posed, not by *Ass*, Boer’s predominant case study for total depravity, but by *The Proposition*. *Ass* may begin with the newborn Euchrid somewhat implausibly tapping out the message “*Life- -Is- -Bad- -Is- -Hell-*” (9) to his twin brother, but, as has been seen, there are hints of redemption and divinity to be found even in that fallen and depraved world. *The Proposition* is set in nineteenth-century frontier Australia, a location, as depicted, of oppressive heat and omnipresent flies, where any sense of grace seems impossibly far away. As the bounty hunter Jellon Lamb says: “I came to this beleaguered land and the God in me just... evaporated.” Unusually for Cave’s work, direct references to God in the film are rare, and are in fact restricted to these kinds of negations; another comes later in the same scene, in which Lamb refers to the outback in general as “this Godforsaken hole.” Taken literally, then, these two comments together suggest that the world of the film is one that has been abandoned by God; a truly fallen, depraved landscape. Yet, once again, careful attention reveals that the theological situation is rather more complex than this.

⁴⁵ Filoramo, 81.

The Proposition carries no specific date, but can be assumed to take place some time after the goldrushes of the 1850s,⁴⁶ a time of rapid inward expansion, paralleling the westward expansion which is the subject of the American western. Peter Limbrick has observed that the “transnationality of settler colonial relations” between central Australia and the American western frontier makes the western genre just as applicable to the former as the latter.⁴⁷ The central subject of the western, whether interrogated or not, is the frontier myth, what Mark Cronlund Anderson calls “America’s secular creation story,” in which the heroic individual is pitted against the dangers and evils of the wilderness.⁴⁸ Captain Stanley in *The Proposition* is clear about his desire to “civilise this land.” Though the immediate context for this line is his capture of Mikey Burns, and his pursuit of Arthur Burns, the film makes it clear throughout, from the opening credits’ nineteenth-century photographs of indigenous people in chains, that the colonial project which Stanley represents attains “civilisation” through the subjugation of indigenous people. Moreover, the transnationality mentioned by Limbrick is attested in the English Stanley’s pursuit of the Irish Burns brothers, which relocates a colonial conflict from the other side of the world. Jim Kitses identifies in the western a “dialectical play of forces” between wilderness and civilisation, with the former concerned with “the individual,” “nature,” and “the West⁴⁹,” the latter with “the community⁵⁰,” “culture,” and “the East.”⁵¹ A classic example of this would be *The Man Who*

⁴⁶ Lamb refers to Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1857, in a way which suggests that the theory of evolution is not yet common knowledge, suggesting perhaps the 1860s or 1870s.

⁴⁷ Peter Limbrick, *Making Settler Cinemas: Film and Colonial Encounters in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 100.

⁴⁸ Mark Cronlund Anderson, *Cowboy Imperialism and Hollywood Film* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 21.

⁴⁹ “West” and “East” here are used in the American sense, with the East Coast representing pseudo-European sophistication, while the west is (at least in the western) the undiscovered country. Much the same is, not coincidentally, true of Australia, whose major cities are predominantly concentrated towards the east of the country and on the coast.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 4 for more on the opposition of the individual and the communal in Cave’s work.

⁵¹ Jim Kitses, *Horizons West*. 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 2007), 12-13.

Shot Liberty Valence, which centres on the uneasy relationship between John Wayne's gunfighter, who lives on the edge of town, and James Stewart's lawyer, newly arrived from the East Coast. In *The Proposition*, this dialectic focuses on the character of Charlie, and the proposition of the title: his mission from Stanley to kill one of his brothers to save the other.

Here, therefore, a species of dualism comes into view again, in this wilderness/civilisation dialectic. Yet this is not directly analogous to the kind of Gnostic good/evil dualism seen above, since neither wilderness nor civilisation is depicted as particularly desirable. Civilisation is the force which condemns the Aborigines to servitude and poverty (if not outright massacre), which whips Mikey so savagely that he ultimately dies. It is represented by the policemen who drunkenly sing "Rule Britannia" with utter sincerity as the camera cuts to the bodies of the indigenous people they have just murdered piled unceremoniously outside. Yet wilderness is encountered in the numerous bodies of people and animals throughout the film filled with spears, in Arthur's fatal beating of Sergeant Lawrence, in the attempted rape of Martha Stanley by the Burns gang, and the offscreen murder of the Hopkins family. Charlie strays from one world to the other, first venturing out under the auspices of Stanley's proposition, before being attacked in an ambush, and taken in by Arthur's gang, whereupon he is divested of clothing from the waist up (literally stripped of the signifiers of civilisation) and joins the gang's attempt to rescue Mikey, and their subsequent raid on the Stanley house upon discovering that Mikey has died. Ultimately, he rejects both identities, killing Arthur to prevent him killing Stanley and raping Martha Stanley, before telling Stanley "I'm going to be with my brother" and walking away. The film's final line is Arthur asking Charlie "What are you going to do now?" before he keels over dead. Charlie seems ultimately to have achieved some kind of synthesis, but its exact nature is kept a mystery.

The landscape of the film is crucial to this dualism. William Verrone quotes the film's director, John Hillcoat:

These were brutal times, but the land also had a great beauty to it. I think it's a metaphor for the whole thing. In the middle of the day it's so harsh and oppressive yet when the sunsets come it's stunningly beautiful. It goes from one extreme to the other.⁵²

Here, as in previous examples, the site of brutality and menace is also where great beauty is to be found. Verrone argues that the film inverts the traditional western use of landscape: "the elemental visual appeal of the wide-open spaces of the landscape becomes a menacing and confining threat."⁵³ This is certainly true of the Burns gang, who hide in the crags and narrow corridors of a rocky outcrop which hems them in. The indigenous characters who mostly lurk around the film's edges are at home in the landscape, but their home is under threat, not only from Stanley, but from Arthur as well. When a group of captured indigenous people is interrogated by Stanley, they conflate Arthur with Stanley and his men; when Stanley asks them if they have seen a "white man," the translated reply is "white man catches them." For them, the landscape is a home under threat. For the settlers, it is a threatening force to be tamed and made into a home. For the Burns gang, it is a home from which they are under threat. For all three groups, these concepts of home and threat, safety and danger, are inherently intertwined.

As Ross Gibson has observed, initial ideas of the imagined *Terra Australis* as an earthly paradise gave way, with the actual discovery and exploration of the continent in the final decades of the eighteenth century, to a nineteenth-century notion of "a region of desolation and suffering which was paradoxically also attractive because it offered hope for people who despaired of justice or

⁵² Quoted in William Verrone, "'People Just Ain't No Good:': Nick Cave's Noir Western, *The Proposition*," *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 158.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

redemption in moribund England.”⁵⁴ Moreover, as Gibson notes, as a penal colony, Australia was inherently purgatorial, framed as “a society of guilty sinners suffering in a bizarre environment.”⁵⁵ In this way, the inherent ambivalence of the notion of purgatory is at play in the predominant nineteenth-century understanding of Australia: a place where redemption may be found through suffering. On this understanding, then, the theological character of *The Proposition*’s landscape becomes clearer. It is the place where the characters must suffer and test themselves in order to achieve grace. It reveals them, bringing out the brutality of Charlie, Arthur, and Stanley. Arthur seeks redemption, as Verrone argues, through “family,” both his fraternal relationship with his brothers and the created family of his gang, but is undermined by his own brutality; Two-Bob, the only black member of the gang, leaves, and Arthur is killed by his own brother.⁵⁶ Stanley seeks to create his own paradise, a colonial project which involves attempting to transplant England to Australia. This project’s essential absurdity is highlighted by the roast Christmas dinner eaten by the Stanleys, in formal dress, in scorching heat. That it is based on exploitation is clear from the fact that their pristine rose garden is tended by a native servant, Toby, who removes his shoes, a symbol of “civilised” identity when he leaves the property. For both these reasons, the project is doomed to failure: the roast dinner is interrupted by the Burns gang’s attack, the rose garden is ruined by the fatally wounded Arthur dragging himself through it, and the Stanleys are left beaten, their home violated. Only Charlie, the one who embodies the dualism at the heart of the film, has any chance at freeing himself from all of this brutality, though his ultimate fate is left unclear.

⁵⁴ Ross Gibson, *The Diminishing Paradise: Changing Literary Perceptions of Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984), 86.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁶ Verrone, 169-170.

The world of *The Proposition* is, then, not quite the fallen, grace-free setting that Lamb's characterisation of it as "Godforsaken" suggests. It is a place of brutality, as Lamb's own conduct and ultimate fate (dying slowly from being shot in the stomach by Arthur) bear witness to, but this brutality comes about through the interplay of various oppositional forces, and it is by standing at the axis of this opposition, as Charlie does, that one may begin to find a way beyond, redemption or salvation. As Hillcoat's comment suggests, here once again intense beauty can be recognised precisely at the point of extreme brutality. The Australian frontier landscape of the film is a perfect Gnostic landscape: harsh and painful to live in, but containing a divine spark that can only be found by a few who manage to transcend. Charlie's ultimate fate may be to wander the wilderness as a lone outcast but for Cave, as will be seen in the next chapter, these kinds of outcast figures have a particular sacred quality.

Conclusion

As Lyn McCredde has observed:

Cave's sacred is deeply enmeshed in the human dimensions of flesh, erotics and violence.⁵⁷ The sacred – the holy, divine, hierophanic, epiphanic – and the profane do not stand apart in his work, but are in dynamic and conflicting conjunction, creating a sprawling, unsystematic and confrontational dialogue with divine forces which may or may not be 'there'.⁵⁸

While McCredde's focus is on the human within Cave's work, as seen over the course of this chapter, the depravity that often characterises Cave's characters

⁵⁷ For more on the erotic sacred in Cave, see Chapter 6. For the metaphysical resonances of violence in his work, see Chapter 1.

⁵⁸ Lyn McCredde, "Fleshed Sacred: The Carnal Theologies of Nick Cave," *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, ed. Karen Welberry and Tanya Dalziel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 194.

exists in its own dynamic relationship with the world around those characters. Bunny Munro's last words, to his son, are "I just found this world a hard place to be good in" (277). This is an experience that is common to many of Cave's characters, who, like Loretta in "The Curse of Millhaven," choose to reject concepts of goodness and purity:

Since I was no bigger than a weevil they've been saying I was evil
That if 'bad' was a boot then I'd fit it
That I'm a wicked young lady, but I've been trying hard lately
O fuck it! I'm a monster! I admit it! (253)

As seen at the beginning of this chapter with "Up Jumped the Devil," many of these characters, like Bunny, choose to blame their transgressions on the sinful nature of the world around them. As has been seen throughout this chapter, though, Cave's work does not at all support this, and comments like Bunny's are treated with no shortage of irony. The world is not paradise, but it is not entirely evil either: their sin is their own.

Towards the end of his account of depravity in Cave's work, Boer argues that:

[I]t is a very individual madness, an individual depravity, an individual eschatology. Rain and storms may come, killers may descend, the valley may slide inexorably towards a climatic destruction, nature may be responsible for one's deformities, history itself may be enlisted, but it begins with and centres around an individual, whether Euchrid Eucrow or Bunny Munro.⁵⁹

Or, one might add, Charlie Burns, or Loretta, or any number of Cavean protagonists. As has been suggested already, the concept of the individual is crucial to Cave's theology. This too ties into Gnosticism, which is, at root,

⁵⁹ Boer, 28.

dedicated to how the individual may achieve enlightenment (Gnosis). The next two chapters, however, will delve into Cave's theology of the individual from different angle

Chapter 4: Jesus Alone: The Isolated Self

“[T]he Christian heroism (and perhaps it is rarely to be seen) is to venture wholly to be oneself, as an individual man, this definite individual man, alone before the face of God” – Søren Kierkegaard¹

“Alone before the face of God” is a fitting description for the central figures of much of Nick Cave’s work, from the deranged outcast Euchrid Eucrow of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* to the forlorn lovers of 2016’s “Girl in Amber” or “I Need You.” These individuals are in varying ways defined by the fact of their isolation – some, like Euchrid, lash out at those who reject them, while others focus on the object of their longing, sometimes to the point of worship.² Does it follow, then, that these are heroic figures? Or is their isolation rather a sign of their abjection?

What is at stake here is the extent to which Cave’s work, and specifically his concept of revelation, subscribes to the proto-existentialist theology of Kierkegaard. The relevance of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling* to certain of the figures in Cave’s songs, notably “When I First Came to Town,” has already been noted by Carl Lavery in an investigation of how isolation and abandonment are performed in Cave’s songs via the medium of the voice.³ This chapter will further Lavery’s work, alongside that of Roland Boer,⁴ in examining the individuals at the centre of Cave’s work, and the extent to which they can indeed be positioned within a broadly Kierkegaardian frame as authentic selves. It will also further Lavery and particularly Boer’s attention to

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1954), 142.

² See the next two chapters for more on this.

³ Carl Lavery, “The Performance of Voice: Nick Cave and the Dialectic of Abandonment,” *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 27-44.

⁴ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death & Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

Cave himself, as an authorial and performative presence within his work. In addition to Kierkegaard, it will make use of the dialectical theology of Karl Barth to attempt to place Cave's work in a recognisable theological framework. Thus it will be demonstrated that the self seen at the centre of Cave's work stands in a dialectical relationship to concepts of relationality and isolation.

A note on the word "authentic" is necessary here. Authenticity, the notion of the "real," has a great deal of currency in discourse on popular music and particularly the kind of rock music which Cave performs, alongside related concepts like sincerity and commercialism. While these considerations are relevant particularly to the reception of Cave's work, and will be a part of the discussion, the predominant focus of this chapter is on philosophical and theological frames of the self, and so this more sociological discussion will have to be left for future work.

"Straight to You"

To begin with, it will be helpful to examine one of the strongest and most striking examples of Cave's apocalyptic (and eschatological) lyric form:⁵ "Straight to You," from the 1992 album *Henry's Dream*. "Straight to You" can justifiably be considered one of Cave's signature songs; while it is not frequently performed live, it does receive relatively frequent (by Cave's standards) radio airplay, and its music video has received a substantial number of views (again by Cavean standards) on YouTube.⁶ For these reasons, aside from simple merit, the song makes a logical place for any discussion of Cave's work based on close reading to begin.

⁵ Both the apocalypse and the lyric are forms which inhere around the individual subject – see chapters 2 and 5 respectively.

⁶ 1,636,642 views as of the afternoon of 18th July 2018, as compared to, for instance, 2,464,316 views for "The Mercy Seat," a song which Cave has performed at every live concert since 1988.

“Straight to You” is a song of both isolation and togetherness, apparent opposites which reflect and illuminate each other. The lovers of the song are placed before a destructive backdrop, set against and in opposition to not only a world but even a paradise that is crumbling:

Gone are the days of rainbows
 Gone are the nights of swinging from the stars⁷
 [...]

 Heaven has denied us its kingdom
 The saints are drunk and howling at the moon
 The chariots of angels are colliding (194-195)

Hence the lovers are trapped in a frozen present, without access either to an idyllic past or a paradisiacal future. This isolation should throw the lovers’ togetherness into sharp relief, and yet the song is at pains to remind the listener that the lovers’ togetherness is their desired future state rather than their present one. There are only three occurrences of the first-person plural in the thirty-six lines of the song, as opposed to thirteen first-person and eight second-person singulars (the latter coming entirely in the song’s chorus). The song, moreover, is insistent and meticulous about the passage of time, and the lovers’ place within it: the phrase “this is the time” occurs twice in the first verse. For this reason, it is all the more striking that almost every occurrence of the future tense is associated with the union of the lovers, specifically the phrase “I’ll come running” (or “a-running”), which occurs five times in the course of the song. The only other two uses of the future tense are associated with the destructive backdrop of the song: “For the sea will swallow up the mountains/And the sky will throw thunder-bolts and sparks” (194). The apocalyptic destruction is,

⁷ The next song on the album *Henry’s Dream*, “Brother, My Cup is Empty” contains the lines “I’ve been sliding down on rainbows/I’ve been swinging from the stars” (197), furthering the sense of a prelapsarian past, strikingly associated with heavenly bodies, suggesting a joy contingent on divine approval.

then, intertwined strikingly if implicitly with the lovers' being together. The deferred union of the two lovers itself, then, becomes a fantastical projection through this juxtaposition. The song is less a snapshot of a perfect union and more the fevered imagining of a single, alone figure.

The catastrophic world of the song is no more than a hazy backdrop for the lovers, a stage for the grand romance, but it also serves a further purpose. As is generally the case with apocalyptic imagery (see chapter 2), it inheres around the subject, in this instance to a solipsistic degree. The lovers of "Straight to You" have specifically, perhaps personally, been denied entry to paradise, and the lightning is suggested to be directed "straight at" the central figure's lover. At no point is there any sense of a wider world beyond these two, beyond perhaps the paradise from which they are barred, which is still introduced via the very fact that they have been denied it. All of the apocalyptic destruction is focused around them - it is "*our* great undoing" and "the light in *our* window is fading" (emphases mine). As suggested already, it seems overtly or otherwise designed to bring them together. This fantastical solipsism, then, leads inescapably to the conclusion that all of this destruction is in fact engineered by the central figure. He is at the centre of it all both as victim and, in this sense, as instigator. He is isolated, but his isolation is underscored and defined by relationality.

The Destructive Individual

"Straight to You" is, if anything, one of the more subtle instances of a particularly Cavean theme: that of an individualism so extreme that it actively disrupts the collective. In this instance, apocalyptic destruction is willed into existence as a manifestation of desire. In many other cases, this kind of violent disruption is confronted far more overtly.

Murder Ballads is the most apposite example here. Insofar as the various murderers on the album have a motive, it seems to be an aggrieved sense of self. Stagger Lee insists on his own identity, announcing his name as well as his self-description as a “bad motherfucker” at every available opportunity, and shoots the barman for meeting his machismo and aggression with a similarly hostile attitude. The characters in “Song of Joy,” “Lovely Creature,” “Henry Lee”⁸ and “Where the Wild Roses Grow,” while their direct motives differ (and are quite hazy in the former two cases), all murder their lovers essentially for being outside of their control to a greater or lesser degree. The murder victims of “Song of Joy” and “Henry Lee” are both stabbed in a jealous rage,⁹ while the male narrator of “Where the Wild Roses Grow” proclaims “All beauty must die” (251) after killing his idolised lover with a rock – whether this too is born of jealousy or envy, or a perverse desire to preserve her beauty, is left unclear.

Most striking of all is “O’Malley’s Bar.” The central figure of this song begins by describing himself:

I am tall and I am thin
 Of an enviable height
 And I’ve been known to be quite handsome
 From a certain angle and in a certain light (260)

Not incidentally, this physical description, combined with the “raven hair” mentioned twice later in the song, bears some resemblance to Cave himself – as will be discussed below and in the next chapter, this kind of author/subject confusion is something which Cave invokes a good deal. For the moment, though, what is relevant is the degree to which the narrator insists on fixing an

⁸ “Henry Lee,” like “Stagger Lee,” was not actually written by Cave, but is included here on the basis that Cave’s choice of material to cover is as revealing of his preoccupations as his actual writing.

⁹ The actual murder is only described in retrospect in “Song of Joy,” but the narrator’s description of Joy being “stabbed repeatedly/ And stuffed into a sleeping bag” (244) suggests vitriolic anger in its vividness.

image of himself in the listener's mind from the beginning. As he proceeds with his killing spree, he pauses occasionally to ensure that his, apparently marginalised, identity will be fixed in the minds of his victims in their final moments:

I've lived in this town for thirty years

And to no one am I a stranger

[...]

I said "I want to introduce myself

And I'm glad that you all came"

And I leapt upon the bar

And I shouted down my name

[...]

'Do you know I lived in your street?' I cried

And he looked at me like I was crazy

'O,' he said, 'I had no idea.' (262-264)

So extreme is this individualistic focus, indeed, that it elevates this central figure above the merely human. Twice in the song he refers offhand to having angelic wings. His victims are likened to religious images of the Virgin Mary and Saints Francis and Sebastian, suggesting both a distorted perception and a curious kind of inverted martyrdom – an election through perpetrating violence rather than suffering it. At the end of the song, when he contemplates suicide, he is surprised to find that "My hand it looked almost human/ As I held it [his gun] to my head" (265). He has raised himself above the mundane – though not, it turns out, so far that he is willing to die.

This self-imposed divine aspect is significant not least because it points to something of a trope of Cave's work: the murderous, outcast individual who believes themselves to have a direct connection with God, or even to be divine

agents. The most overt expression of this is Euchrid Eucrow in *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, who quite literally believes himself to be acting on divine orders, and whose derangement ultimately convinces him that his slow descent into the mud of the swamp is an ascension to heaven. Similarly, Lottie in “The Curse of Millhaven” acts out the injunction (as she sees it) “all God’s children, they all gotta die” with gleeful zeal (252). The murderer of “The Mercy Seat,” in likening the electric chair on which he is to be executed directly to both the heavenly throne of God and the seat atop the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus, suggests that his violent acts have brought him into direct communion with God. Here, Cave is taking on the violence that apparently drew him to the Old Testament,¹⁰ making it an apparent prerequisite for divine connection.

Thus there is a kind of divine election at play in those songs, albeit one which seems to be intertwined with at least some human choice. At first glance, indeed, it might appear that these individuals are in fact choosing to become elect; that the narrator of “O’Malley’s Bar,” for instance, gains his angelic wings through his violent retributive acts. Closer examination, however, cannot sustain this perception. These characters are acting in *response* to revelation of one kind or another – Euchrid to what he perceives to be the actual voice of God, Lottie and the “Mercy Seat” narrator to a received revelation in the form of either religious preaching or the textual revelation of the Bible. Hence, what is in fact happening is that these figures are *responding* to the possibility of their own election, as received through revelation. This is no pure Calvinist predestination, but closer to a Barthian conception of election, which weaves together election with a firm doctrine of free will. The elect, for Barth, “demonstrate to themselves and others that they are elect by entering upon and

¹⁰ Cave has spoken/written of this in a number of places, but e.g. “The God of the Old Testament seemed a cruel and rancorous God, and I loved the way he would wipe out entire nations at a whim.” (“The Flesh Made Word,” 138).

continuing along the road that corresponds to their election."¹¹ They must act in accordance with their own "special calling"¹² in order to fulfil the possibility inherent within that election. Salvation, even after the initial calling, requires constant striving towards God.

One crucial aspect of this striving is the fact that these characters are isolated from their communities. Moving towards God (at least in their own minds) moves them away from the people around them. Sometimes, as with Euchrid and the "O'Malley's Bar" narrator, this isolation predates their murderous acts, and in fact feeds into it, as seen in the latter's desire for recognition in his victims' final moments. A figure like Lottie, however, is implicitly marked out from the community by her violent acts. At first, she seems to be part of it; the first line of the song is "I live in a town called Millhaven," and she goes on to refer to it as "our little town" (252-253). Midway through the song, however, her identity as the murderer is revealed and she goes from resident to predator.¹³ Focus shifts to her as outcast:

Since I was no bigger than a weevil they've been saying I was evil
That if "bad" was a boot then I'd fit it
That I'm a wicked young lady, but I've been trying hard lately
O fuck it! I'm a monster! I admit it! (253)

Here there is a clear choice on Lottie's part – embracing the role of "monster." From this point on, she describes her various crimes with relish, until the point at which she is literally removed from the town to an asylum, which "ain't such a bad old place to have a home in" (254). The asylum is the home that she has

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume II Part 2: The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 341.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Though the repeat listener's knowledge of her killings gives new and sinister meaning to the first verse's "It's around about then that I used to go a-roaming" (252).

essentially chosen for herself, and in which she is kept in isolation, and so, by her extreme individualistic mindset, it is perfectly comfortable.

In moving away from community in this manner, these characters enter into what Carl Lavery describes as the “dialectic of abandonment.” In Lavery’s account, Cave’s characters take part in a Kierkegaardian teleological suspension of the ethical – they move willingly from the realm of the ethical to the divine, as well as from the rational to the irrational,¹⁴ by way of abandoning, or being abandoned by, their communities.¹⁵ Hence they move, to use Kierkegaard’s terms, from the “universal” to the “particular,” which Kierkegaard (or “Johannes de Silentio,” the identity under which *Fear and Trembling* is written)¹⁶ identifies as the realm of faith, of God, and hence “higher” than the universal.¹⁷

Kierkegaard’s concept of the teleological suspension of the ethical rises in *Fear and Trembling* from an investigation of the Biblical story of Abraham’s thwarted sacrifice of his son Isaac. In its simplest form (which by necessity strips much nuance from Kierkegaard’s account), the argument is that Abraham’s obedience to the divine command to sacrifice his son entails a flouting, or surpassing, of the mundane ethical, since the killing of one’s own child is clearly ethically reprehensible. Hence, in this *particular* case, the *universality* of the ethical is risen above by virtue of the divine command, and hence Abraham’s acting in accordance with the divine will – his election, in fact.

¹⁴ The concept of Kierkegaard as an irrationalist is hotly debated – see e.g. C. Stephen Evans, “Is Kierkegaard an Irrationalist? Reason, Paradox, and Faith,” in *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2006) for a strong argument on behalf of Kierkegaard’s rationality. As already suggested, however (see chapter 2), Cave writes in a tradition of Christian unreason, and so it is not surprising that his character would make the leap into the irrational, whether or not this leap is truly fully Kierkegaardian.

¹⁵ Carl Lavery, “The Performance of Voice: Nick Cave and the Dialectic of Abandonment,” *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 32-33.

¹⁶ For simplicity’s sake, I have continued to use Kierkegaard’s name, but it is worth remembering the distance that this authorial persona provides, as it problematizes any attempt to identify *Fear and Trembling* (and Kierkegaard’s other published works) purely with Kierkegaard’s own thought.

¹⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1954), 64-5.

By virtue of this election, Abraham becomes a hero, a “knight of faith,” but Kierkegaard is clear that this can *only* happen by divine will: “A man can become a tragic hero by his own powers – but not a knight of faith.”¹⁸

As Lavery suggests, this Kierkegaardian paradigm is suggestive for Cave’s work, since “[i]n both cases, if the subject is to move closer to God, to experience an unmediated relationship with the divine, then s/he has to be willing to sacrifice the world of the universal, the world of language and law.”¹⁹ Isolation from the human is prized for its potential to unite the subject with the divine. And yet there is, as Lavery acknowledges, a tension here. Cave’s characters are frequently only too happy to forsake the law, but language is rather more difficult. In their isolation, Cave’s narrators are driven by a need to connect through language, to communicate. Once again, the “O’Malley’s Bar” narrator’s desire for connection at the moment of his victims’ death is apposite here, but one might also think of Euchrid, who, though unable to speak, thrives on language in the prose form of the novel, communicating in what Cave himself calls “a kind of hyper-poetic thought-speak not meant to be spoken, a mongrel language that was part Biblical, part Deep South dialect, part gutter slang, at times obscenely reverent and at others reverently obscene.”²⁰ “Mongrel” it may be, but as the semantic games of Cave’s very description of it make clear, at least some of that obscene reverence is for language itself; as Cave calls it elsewhere, “the blanket that I threw over the invisible man [God], which gave him shape and form.”²¹ This suggests, then, that Cave’s narrators realise on some level that something has gone wrong with their theology. They cannot but be drawn back to language, a human imposition, as an attempt to express the divine *logos*.

¹⁸ Kierkegaard, 77.

¹⁹ Lavery, 33.

²⁰ Nick Cave, “The Flesh Made Word,” *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997), 142.

²¹ Nick Cave, “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), 6.

Lavery illustrates his thesis by detailed reference to “When I First Came to Town.” For reasons that will become clear, “Papa Won’t Leave You, Henry” (from the same album, 1992’s *Henry’s Dream*) suits my focus rather better, while still touching on much of the same basic thematic matter. The narrator of that song begins by lamenting the deaths of his lover and his friend Michel – the latter has died violently, in a manner that seems to confer martyrdom upon him: “A bloody halo like a think-bubble/Circling his head.” (187) Here is another link specifically between violence and the divine, such that the narrator’s bloody exploits in a brothel in the third verse come across more transcendent than mundane. In the fourth verse, however, he dispassionately lists the horrors of his current location:

Entire towns being washed away
 Favelas exploding on inflammable spillways
 Lynch-mobs, death squads, babies being born without brains (190)

The effect of this barrage of imagery²² is to desensitise the listener, and hence the narrator comes across as dispassionate, as though the violent end of the last verse and his presumed flight from justice has marked a decisive break with the conventional world, the Kierkegaardian ethical, such that he can only survey it from a distance. Moreover, this verse confirms him as a specifically peripatetic figure – the song begins with “I went out walking” (187), and this walk continues through the first two verses as the narrator mentions his surroundings in the midst of his introspection (“I passed beside the mission house” (187), “The slum dogs, they are barking” (188)) before reaching the brothel in the third verse. The beginning of the fourth verse – “It’s the rainy season where I’m living” (190) – suggests that his present tense location²³ is

²² On the *Henry’s Dream* recording these lines are sung quickly, within eight seconds (4.26-4.34), such that the listener hardly has time to take each disparate image in.

²³ This reference to the “rainy season,” and to “favelas” a few lines later, heavily imply that the narrator’s location is in fact Brazil, where Cave was living at the time of writing and recording *Henry’s Dream*.

distinct from the past tense location of the first three. The overall effect is of a wandering figure, devoid of home or community – reminiscent for the New Testament reader of either John the Baptist (the “voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Matthew 3.3))²⁴ or Jesus (“the Son of man hath not where to put his head” (Matthew 8.20)).

Indeed, as John H. Baker has observed,²⁵ Cave’s work has no shortage of these kinds of moorless drifters. Many are specifically attempting to escape justice, as in “Up Jumped the Devil” (“To the digs and deserts of Mexico/Where my neck was safer from the lynching rope” (142)), “When I First Came to Town” (“O Lord, every God-damn turn I take/I fear the noose, I fear the stake” (201)) or possibly “Papa...,” though this is only ever implied in the latter case. The narrator of “Song of Joy,” on the other hand, says only that he “drift[s] from land to land” (245), with the implication being that he is searching for further victims. Whatever the specifics of their cases, these endlessly drifting figures become contemporary descendants of Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, though their curse is as implicit as it is ambivalent, and they embrace the brutal state of nature in which they live.

Lavery’s argument has one particular merit which elevates it above much of the nascent field of Cave studies – namely, its sustained attention to the manner in which Cave’s vocal performance acts as a vehicle for the lyrics, which are experienced by the audience in a performance which as a medium for meaning is inextricable from the words themselves.²⁶ In line with this, it is vital

²⁴ Cave’s own John the Baptist account, “Mercy,” is relevant to much of this discussion: it depicts a man who has abjured community and been abandoned by his followers, who is close to death (and hence to God, like the narrator of “The Mercy Seat”), and who describes himself as “in a state of nature” (148). The main distinction is that John performs no violence, but has violence done to him, in contrast to the inverted martyrdom of e.g. “O’Malley’s Bar.”

²⁵ John H. Baker, “Nick Cave: Christian Artist?” *The Art of Nick Cave* (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 230.

²⁶ Boer also devotes some attention to performance, though his approach has a good deal more to do with musical form in a generic sense.

to emphasise that Cave's many first-person narrators²⁷ are encountered in and through Cave himself. They are, quite literally, given voice by him. Hence it is impossible to consider the nature of the self in Cave's work in a manner divorced from Cave's performance – not only the literal performance of the words but, on a wider level, his artistic persona.

Cave's Persona

It is clear that Cave is aware of the operation of a kind of artistic persona. He has often been resoundingly clear about the artifice of his profession – asked in 2008 about rock performers' (or "rock stars"²⁸ in his phrasing) engagement with contemporary political or social issues, he responded "a rock star is the last person I want my information coming from [...] Because they're not real people; we're not real people."²⁹ The change of pronoun here comes across as simultaneously proud and confessional, suggesting an undercurrent of ambivalence. This ambivalence is significant, because Cave, like many of his influences (one might think of figures like Leonard Cohen, John Cale³⁰ and Patti Smith,³¹ who came to rock and pop music from high art – poetry for Cohen and Smith, art music for Cale), exists as part of a constant dialectic between the postmodern shallowness and post-Romantic sincerity which both seem to be demanded by rock music.

Among Cave's stated influences are many who overtly made use of the inherent theatricality of rock music, particularly glam performers such as David

²⁷ All of the songs referenced up to this point are written in the first person, as indeed is the majority of Cave's musical oeuvre. See the next chapter for more on the nature of the first-person self in Cave's work.

²⁸ While I have preferred the more neutral "performer(s)" in what follows, "star(s)" is useful for the weight it carries in discourses of fame and culture industry consumption.

²⁹ Phil Sutcliffe, "Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 2," *Nick Cave Sinner Saint: The True Confessions*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 232.

³⁰ See Chapter 1 for more on the relationship between Cale and Cave.

³¹ Smith is mentioned as an influence by Cave in *The Sick Bag Song* (27), and also supported the Bad Seeds on a 2018 tour.

Bowie, Bryan Ferry and Alex Harvey.³² All three operated within at least one “musical persona,” in Philip Auslander’s terms, “a performed presence that is neither an overtly fictional character nor simply equivalent to the performer’s ‘real’ identity.”³³ Moreover, all three, to a greater or lesser extent, consciously constructed these personae – Bowie most famously, in his playing of onstage “characters”, such as Ziggy Stardust. And yet what is most striking about characters like Ziggy is how thin the façade actually is. The 1972/73 tour on which Bowie performed in his Ziggy guise was still advertised and presented as a David Bowie tour. At no point was there any pretence that the singer on the stage was anyone other than David Bowie. Hence Ziggy was only ever an aspect of Bowie, and so his playing of the character became a way of dramatising an aspect of himself – Bowie as “rock star.”³⁴

It is partly this self-consciousness which makes Bowie such a clear example of the way in which the persona of “rock star” operates. To put it another way, Bowie’s personae³⁵ were consciously constructed, rather than being unconscious performative expressions, as may also be the case. But what is striking is that no matter how prominent the shallowness, the desire for a sincere connection, either from artist or audience, seems to shine through. The *Ziggy Stardust* album ends with Bowie exhorting his imagined audience to “give me your hands/’Cause you’re not alone,”³⁶ which, whether it be read as suggesting a desire for connection on the artist’s part or a cynical manipulation

³² All three have been referenced by Cave in numerous interviews. Ferry also makes a number of appearances in *The Sick Bag Song* (28, 55), while Cave covered Harvey’s “The Hammer Song” on *Kicking Against the Pricks*.

³³ Philip Auslander, “Musical Personae,” *The Drama Review* 50.1 (Spring 2006), 102.

³⁴ A self-fulfilling prophecy, as it was in 1972, performing as Ziggy, that Bowie, after a series of near-successes, finally “broke” the market and became one of the most famous and influential rock performers in the world.

³⁵ The plural is used here not only because of Bowie’s famously changing “characters,” but also to indicate that any given performer need not be locked into a single role.

³⁶ David Bowie, “Rock and Roll Suicide,” *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, RCA, 1972.

of a similar desire from the audience, seems to stand as a stark indication of the prevalence of such desire

To return to Cave, then, he even more than most performers exhibits this kind of shallowness/sincerity dialectic. When he performs live, he poses and grandstands, but also interacts heavily with the front rows of the audience, grabbing hands, singing lines to individuals and, latterly, inviting people onstage for the final song of the show. He has recently sworn off media interviews out of a disdain for the mediating influence of the interviewers, and is currently choosing instead to do intimate question-and-answer sessions with fans, not dissimilar to Bruce Springsteen's recent songs-and-stories residency on Broadway. These sessions seem to allow for more direct interaction, and yet are actually more exclusive, since they are not officially recorded for dissemination, and since the price of tickets is likely to exclude any but enthusiastic Cave fans, who are unlikely to ask particularly difficult or challenging questions.³⁷ His direct engagement with fan questions on the blog *The Red Hand Files* is far less exclusive, but in allowing Cave to choose the questions he answers, is similarly pitched to avoid difficult questions.

Cave's music videos provide a perfect example of his self-aestheticisation and presentation. Stan Hawkins suggests that "more often than not the artist is taken to be the songwriter and/or protagonist of audio-visual texts,"³⁸ and this holds true for Cave's videos, which invariably have Cave at their centre.³⁹ The majority of Cave's videos feature the band (whether The Birthday Party, the Bad Seeds or Grinderman) performing, often on a stage ("Straight to You," "(Are You) The One That I've Been Waiting For?", "More News from

³⁷ Both the assessment of the usefulness of these question and answer sessions and Cave's stated reason for not doing interviews anymore are drawn from my attendance at such a session in the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on the 5th of June 2018.

³⁸ Stan Hawkins, *The British Pop Dandy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 41.

³⁹ This claim of the artist as protagonist has large implications for the reading of texts, which will be examined in the next chapter.

Nowhere”), though not always with an audience. This is Cave, like Bowie, constructing himself *as* “rock star.” The video for “Straight to You,” for instance, in addition to the band (framed by red curtains⁴⁰), features a collection of circus- or fairground-type performers (a belly dancer, a firebreather and a magician), implicitly placing the Bad Seeds in the company of these kinds of performers – popular entertainers, rather than “serious” artists.

A particularly striking illustration of the shallowness/sincerity dialectic can be found in the video for “Do You Love Me?”, in which Cave journeys around São Paulo. During the first verse, Cave enters a bar, in which he is greeted by various figures who are named in subtitle – the final figure to be named being Cave himself, a sly nod to his role at the centre of this video, since the audience already knows who he is.⁴¹ This done, he sits at a table, where he dons a pair of glasses and starts writing on a sheet of paper. When the chorus arrives, however, he is transplanted onto a stage and joined by the rest of the Bad Seeds, performing the song directly to camera. There is an apparent disconnect here between Caves – “writer” Cave and “performer” Cave, as highlighted by the glasses, but between the latter, performing to camera, and “real life” Cave who walks around São Paulo, where he lived at the time. Yet there is also a continuity – both the Cave writing on a sheet of paper and the one walking around the city are still singing (or miming) the lyrics of the song. The video highlights the complexity of his inter-persona position by presenting these personae separately while also suggesting a degree of commonality.

Further feeding into these questions of personae is Cave’s image. He has generally striven to present a consistent aesthetic – slicked-back hair, black suit – an image that dovetails perfectly with the notion of him as “dark,” brooding and verbose. In a 1997 interview with Stephen Dalton, Cave complains about

⁴⁰ A motif which also appears in the first Bad Seeds video, “In the Ghetto.”

⁴¹ For the avoidance of any doubt, Cave is miming to the lyrics throughout, so even someone who has never seen him before may guess at his identity.

being regularly likened to a “Southern Gothic preacher” by “small-minded,” unimaginative journalists.⁴² This is rather disingenuous, given how carefully Cave has cultivated this image, with only occasional breaks,⁴³ since the beginning of the Bad Seeds’ career in 1983. In the same 2008 interview in which he denigrates the idea of the rock star, he explains the reasoning behind the suit:

I don’t feel I wear a suit in a dandyish way. I wear it as a worker. Someone who prepares themselves for the job, you know. It’s always been like that. A certain amount of preparation needs to be done to get yourself ready to come down here [to his office] and do it.⁴⁴

The suggestion, then, is that the suit actually fuels the work by allowing Cave to enter into the persona of “rock star.” This is strikingly distinct from Auslander’s account of what rock musicians did from the 1960s on, by dressing in the same manner as their audience, and hence “imply[ing] that, in principle (if not in fact), any member of the audience could become a musician.”⁴⁵ Rather, Cave is seeking to differentiate himself and enter into the rarefied and elevated realm of the rock star.⁴⁶ This means that, paradoxically, the consistency of this image becomes destabilising when presented in the wrong frame; music journalists such as Alexis Petridis have written of the incongruity of encountering a besuited Cave in “real life,” out shopping, prompting Petridis to refer to him as

⁴² Stephen Dalton, “Around 35, the sustained hatred I had for the world dissipated,” *Uncut Ultimate Music Guide: Nick Cave* April 2013, 99.

⁴³ In the videos for “Stagger Lee” and “More News from Nowhere,” for instance, he wears bright t-shirts. In both cases, however, the deviation from the Cave aesthetic is significant; in “Stagger Lee,” it underlines the playfulness of the video, while in “More News from Nowhere” it fits into the seedy strip club setting.

⁴⁴ Sutcliffe, 214.

⁴⁵ Auslander, 110.

⁴⁶ Not that suits are entirely foreign to Cave’s audience, but few are likely to attend his concerts while wearing one. Hence the suits provide a frame for the performers.

“nothing if not a proper pop star.”⁴⁷ This only reinforces the success of Cave’s attempt to create a persona at one remove from mundane reality.

It is certainly clear that this image is seen as vital to the presentation of his work: of the sixteen Bad Seeds albums, ten feature Cave on their covers. Of these, that of *Henry’s Dream* stands out (see Fig. 1). The cover features an image of Cave’s face and upper torso adorning a billboard, also sporting the name of the album and artist, viewed from an angle. This is Cave *as* image, advertising himself; as icon, his name and image literally writ large. Where a photograph (as seen on the covers of other Bad Seeds albums) would suggest a living, flesh and blood individual, this is a picture of a persona; of Nick Cave the rock star, not Nick Cave the person.



Fig. 1: The *Henry’s Dream* album cover

Cave’s visual image is simple, but striking and instantly recognisable, which is surely one of the reasons why Reinhard Kleist was attracted to him as a subject. In 2018 Kleist produced the graphic novel *Nick Cave: Mercy On Me*, which weaves together imagined scenes from Cave’s biography (the early days

⁴⁷ Alexis Petridis, “Nick Cave: “the greatest feat of artistic honesty would be to retire,”” *The Guardian* 15 February 2013. Web. Accessed 4 Sept 2019.

of the Birthday Party, his relationship with former lover Anita Lane et al) with the narration of his characters (Euchrid Eucrow, Eliza Day of “Where the Wild Roses Grow,” the unnamed central character of “The Mercy Seat”). Indeed, the fictionalised Cave suggests that the narrator of “The Mercy Seat” is in fact “a caricature of me [...] [a] wayward likeness.”⁴⁸ The overall effect is to mythologise Cave’s actual life, such that any vestige of him as a real person is subsumed by the concept of him as rock performer and artist, inextricable from his creations, their roles reversed such that they are given narrative power over Cave himself.

The documentary *20,000 Days on Earth* takes this a step further. The documentary purports to be a representation of 24 hours in Cave’s life – specifically his 20,000th day of life – but undermines its own verisimilitude regularly. Cave’s “day” takes in a visit to a therapist, lunch with Warren Ellis, a trip to a (fictional) archive of his work and an evening with his family, interspersed with car trips in which collaborators Ray Winstone, Blixa Bargeld and Kylie Minogue appear in his car to have ruminative conversations with him, and footage from the recording of *Push the Sky Away*. All of this is guided along by Cave’s abstract, meditative narration, which further suggests that this is less a fly-on-the-wall representation of Cave’s life and more of a stylised, imagined rendering in which Cave remains, despite apparent glimpses of his private life, an essentially unknown figure. Most pointed from this angle is the absence of his wife Susie, only ever glimpsed from behind or out of focus, but regularly referred to by Cave, who at the beginning of the film states that:

There is an understanding between us, a pact, where every secret, sacred moment that exists between a husband and a wife is cannibalised and ground up and spat out the other side in the form of a song.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Reinhard Kleist, *Nick Cave: Mercy On Me* (London: SelfMadeHero, 2017), 297.

⁴⁹*20,000 Days on Earth*. Directed by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, Film 4, 2013.

This means that Susie becomes not so much a significant absence as a cipher, remade in her husband's image of her within the film in the same way that Cave suggests is happening in his songs. This dovetails with the cover of *Push the Sky Away* (see Fig. 2), in which Cave is opening the shutters on a nude Susie, her face covered by her hands, in what appears to be the room that stands in for the couple's bedroom in *20,000 Days on Earth*. Once again, the dialectic is at play here; Cave is apparently being remarkably honest in depicting the privileged role which he holds as an artist over his wife, and yet her complicity in this representation ironically gives it a staged quality, as though its authenticity can only be presented through artifice.

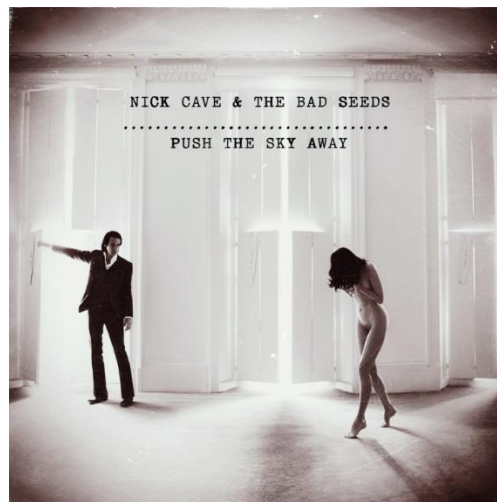


Fig. 2: The *Push the Sky Away* album cover

The other feature-length documentary on Cave, *One More Time with Feeling*, makes for a sharp contrast at first glance. The film deals with both the recording sessions for *Skeleton Tree* and, more generally, Cave's grief over the sudden death of his son Arthur. One particularly striking point of difference, given her hauntological near-presence in *20,000 Days*, is the fact that Susie Cave is present at regular points throughout the film, in scenes with and without her husband. If this is taken to be a direct counter to *20,000 Days*, then it stands for a pulling-aside of artifice; the previous presentation of the married relationship as

it exists in relation to Cave's songs is replaced by a raw portrayal of shared parental grief. Yet this is not to suggest that the shallowness/sincerity dialectic is not in play; in fact, as with *20,000 Days*, this dialectic is at the very heart of the film. On the one hand, it is an examination of a heart-wrenching, almost unimaginable grief. The director and crew, and their equipment, occasionally feature in shot, preserving the sense of rawness by giving the illusion that nothing has been cut out – the film even opens with the director discussing with Cave how the latter is going to enter a shot. Yet this very adherence to verisimilitude also foregrounds the mediated nature of the emotion on show. The audience is reminded that they are watching a film, that their apparent access to Cave, though genuine in the sense that he is expressing emotion which is framed and understood as sincere, is illusory. Cave is speaking, not to them, but to Dominick. This is perhaps the clearest illustration of the artifice/reality synthesis with which Cave operates: the staging of real emotion.

The above has all concentrated on Cave's performance of (as opposed to *as*) "rock star" in the broadly social realm. These elements: his presentation of a consistent image and his awareness of the dialectic, are by no means unusual for a rock performer, apart perhaps from placing him in the Bowie mould of being more than usually self-conscious of the elements of his persona. The next chapter will examine how this is carried through into the actual content of his songs – the presence of a Cavean persona within his lyrics.

The Individual/Community Dialectic

By now, it has been readily established that the cult of the authentic, isolated individual threads its way throughout Cave's career, not only in his written and recorded work but in the way in which he has built up his persona (which is itself an aspect of his "work"). Yet if all of this is taken to square with the

Kierkegaardian particular, a substantial hole opens up in the theology of Cave's work, such as it is. In "The Flesh Made Word," he has this to say:

Jesus said, "Wherever two or more are gathered together, I am in their midst." Jesus said this because wherever two or more are gathered together, there is communion, there is language, there is imagination, there is God.⁵⁰

Here, Cave seems to be espousing the exact opposite of the Kierkegaardian position: that the *logos* can only be expressed through communication, and hence that the community of others is not only desirable, but actually necessary to an experience of grace. How, it may reasonably be asked, can this possibly co-exist with the privileging of the individual seen throughout this chapter?

Of course, the simplest solution is to accept the contradiction. Cave is by no means a theologian or a critic; he is under no obligation to deliver an all-encompassing theory of his own work, and complete theological consistency across almost forty years of writing is rather a lot to expect. Certainly there may be some truth to this, and it is also true that Cave's theological outlook has altered over the course of his career.⁵¹ Yet simply to let the matter lie without further examination would be to do a disservice to the quality and complexity of Cave's oeuvre. This chapter has already demonstrated that the theology of Cave's work, and particularly his ethos of the individual, has some affinity with Barthian theology. Given this, it seems significant that Barth's theology, at least for the first half or so of his career, is inherently dialectical.⁵² In this light, to

⁵⁰ "The Flesh Made Word," 137.

⁵¹ Though it should be noted that this chapter, while it has largely concentrated on examples from the middle of Cave's career, is named for a song from 2016's *Skeleton Tree*, which suggests at least some level of thematic consistency. That said, see chapter 6 for more on the theological development of Cave's later career.

⁵² Barth rather publicly separated from the dialectical theology movement in the 1930s, at least in part because of some German dialectical theologians' appeasement of the Nazi state (see e.g. Gary Dorrien, *The Barthian Revolt in Modern Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), esp. chapter 3). This is not, however, to say that Barth's later thinking is

read the opposition between individual and community noted in this chapter in a dialectical manner is an obvious step.

Indeed, Barth provides a direct paradigm for this. In his doctrine of election, whose application to Cave's individualistic ethos has already been seen, "both community and individual [...] belong together and cannot be separated out from each other."⁵³ Moreover, the election (or salvation) of the community actually precedes that of the individual – Christ's sacrifice was for the fellowship of humanity in general, and hence the individual is only elect by virtue of belonging to such community.⁵⁴ This does not suggest that the election of the individual is subordinate to that of the community, but rather that the two are inextricable – the elect individual is elect by virtue of belonging to a community which is elect by virtue of being composed of elect individuals. Even Cave's most isolated narrators define themselves in relation to a community – Lottie, most obviously, defines herself as "the Curse of Millhaven" (253) – the title of the song, just to drive the point home further. Moreover, as Lavery illustrates by reference to "Brompton Oratory," Cave's narrators frequently find themselves drawn back to community, even if that community is only that between two lovers.⁵⁵ True isolation is next to impossible.

Lavery confronts this individual/community opposition, but finds a solution by privileging Cave's actual compositional and performative practice over and above the more abstract claims of "The Flesh Made Word" – a reasonable position on the face of it. Specifically, Lavery claims that:

inherently *undialectical*; he may have rejected the movement, but dialectics remained a feature of his work.

⁵³ Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 150.

⁵⁴ Barth, 195-6.

⁵⁵ Lavery, 34.

[A]bandonment can be communicated in the extent to which both singer and listener are separated from each other through their experience of the song [...] Cave's songs of abandonment are focused on transporting the listener to the most solitary of places, places where s/he is as lost and forlorn as the narrator himself [...] language and voice play with *and* against each other to leave us naked and alone.⁵⁶

Yet the problem with this position is that it assumes both singer and listener, at opposite poles, to be isolated, when in fact neither is necessarily the case.

Lavery's argument assumes a single isolated listener; quite a leap, given how much of the experience of popular music is communal. Even leaving aside the experience of live performance, recorded music is still made to be broadcast, whether on radio or from any form of music player into which headphones are not plugged (and even headphones can be shared). Given all of this, to assume an isolated listener is a substantial leap. As for the singer, Lavery himself writes later of the way in which the late Conway Savage's backing vocals "echo" Cave's own; for Lavery, these backing vocals "highlight [the narrator's] loneliness."⁵⁷ Yet this ignores the communal element of the song's production; quite aside from the physical reality of the song's production (where producers and engineers, at least, would have been present when Cave's vocal was recorded), Cave's voice is accompanied by a multitude of musicians throughout the song. Hence, the idea that the singer is alone is by no means borne out by the reality of recording and performing music.

A synthesis begins to suggest itself in the very title of the recording entity with which Cave has produced most of his work: Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Here a conjunction unites an individual with a group. The name simultaneously foregrounds Cave and acknowledges the contributions of the

⁵⁶ Lavery, 35.

⁵⁷ Lavery, 39.

other musicians, many of whom (notably Mick Harvey, Blixa Bargeld and Warren Ellis) have been credited as co-writers with Cave of the music throughout the Bad Seeds's career, to say nothing of the explicitly communal Birthday Party and Grinderman, in which credit was always shared. Within the songs themselves, numerous other people have taken lead vocal duty alongside Cave: notably Bargeld ("The Weeping Song"), P.J. Harvey ("Henry Lee"), Kylie Minogue ("Where the Wild Roses Grow"), Shane MacGowan ("What a Wonderful World")⁵⁸, and Chris Bailey ("Bring It On"). In addition, the Bad Seeds' many iterations are frequent presences on backing vocals, either backing up or replying to Cave's voice.⁵⁹ Cave may frequently be isolated in the mix, but he is never alone. Moreover, as Boer points out, in songs such as "Thirsty Dog" the multiplicity of disparate voices lends an element of discordancy to the note(s),⁶⁰ a disharmony which emphasises that this particular community is composed of individuals. In Cave's recorded work, all released under collective names,⁶¹ all of the focus on the individual seen throughout this and the next chapter are mediated entirely through a collective creative project.

Conclusion

Cave's most recent album at the time of writing, 2016's *Skeleton Tree*, begins with the song "Jesus Alone." Its title could refer to the solitary artistic genius of Cave's Christology, a Christology which Boer characterises as "heretical" (in the strictest sense of a belief determined by a particular individual),⁶² as seen in

⁵⁸ Not to mention "Death is Not the End," where these four, plus Cave, Anita Lane and Thomas Wydler, alternate lines.

⁵⁹ A good example of the latter is "Mercy," in which Bargeld's repetition of Cave's lines ("to my knees" et al) towards the end of the song sounds like a forbidding echo, an omen of John the Baptist's imminent death.

⁶⁰ Boer, 130-131.

⁶¹ Apart from the three bands already mentioned, Cave's only recorded musical output is his soundtrack work, all of which is written and recorded with Warren Ellis, and released under both their names.

⁶² Boer, 83. See Chapter 6 for more on heresy in Cave's work.

'The Flesh Made Word' and his introduction to the Gospel of Mark. Alternatively, it could be a reference to the core Reformation doctrine of *sola Christus*, or "by Christ alone," holding that salvation can only be obtained through Christ. Either way, there is an exclusionary focus at play. Yet the chorus goes "With my voice I am calling you,"⁶³ suggesting a desire to break the isolation flagged up in the title, compounded by the line "Let us sit together until the moment comes." Whether or not this desire is successfully fulfilled, its mere existence is suggestive of precisely what has been seen in this chapter – the concomitant striving for isolation and the impossibility of escaping from community. Isolation is, after all, prized precisely as the path to union with God – a state of communion, in fact.

The numerous dialectics seen through this chapter – Lavery's dialectic of abandonment, the shallowness/sincerity dialectic of rock music and the Barthian individual/community dialectic – illustrate the complexity of Cave's concept of the self and its theological implications. It seems clear that the self of Cave's work is to a greater or lesser degree an inescapably relational one. What is missing from this discussion so far, however, is any consideration of the nature of subjectivity in Cave's work. As the discussion of "Straight to You" in this chapter makes clear, however, the subject position, and its figuring of the rest of the world, is often of prime importance. The next chapter, therefore, will examine how the self is constituted in Cave's work from a more internal perspective in order to acquire a fully understanding of his nuanced depiction of the self.

⁶³ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

Chapter 5: The Divine Self

Adorno and the Lyric

Theodor Adorno's work on popular music has been both influential and divisive in popular music studies. His attention to the totalising effect of mass cultural hegemonies, though heavily informed by its 1930s and '40s origin, is surprisingly easy to apply to the contemporary music industry. Weighed heavily against this, though, is his consistent disdain for popular music itself, which throughout his career (and despite the enormous changes in the field between the '30 and '60s) he viewed with disdain, as no more than a form of social control, the "social cement" which served to "lull the listener to inattention," whose apparent autonomy was entirely illusory.¹

Some have attempted to find ways to nuance this disdain. Richard Middleton, for instance, seeks to synthesise Adorno with Benjamin's less abstractly totalising ideas. Benjamin wrote nothing about music specifically, but his work on technology, film in particular, with its attention to ideas of collaboration, mediation and reproduction, is easily applied by Middleton to recorded music.² In doing so, he finds a useful way of theorising the heterogeneity (in source, approach and message) of popular music and the increased media literacy of contemporary audiences. Given that Middleton was writing before the rise of the internet, a potential tool of democratisation with which the music industry is (at best) only beginning to catch up, the value of such an approach becomes all the more apparent. Simon Frith chooses to take Adorno's aesthetic theory seriously (in contrast to what he claims the main sociological response to Adorno has been³), but argues that since the high/low art distinction that Adorno replicates has evolved to the point of being taken for

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *On Record*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), 311.

² Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), 65.

³ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1996), 13.

granted (“a social fact”), the logical path is to apply the same evaluative principles to popular music as to art music, while bearing in mind the different material and historical circumstances in which these types of music are consumed.⁴

Others, from a more Marxist perspective, have whole-heartedly embraced Adorno. From a Cave studies perspective, the most relevant of these is Roland Boer.⁵ Like Frith, Boer makes use of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, referring heavily to his substantial collection of writings on art music. Unlike many popular music critics, however, Boer is unafraid to make use of Adorno’s

concern with the social location of music, in which the very autonomy and even alienation of music and the musician (authenticity and desire to avoid ‘selling out’) is a far more telling register of social and economic location than any direct reference⁶

Throughout his book, Boer deploys Adorno’s criticisms of popular music in unalloyed form, especially with regard to his observations on the status of the rock star amid the aforementioned discourses of authenticity, which will be relevant later in this chapter.

For all of this attention to the sociological implications of Adorno’s work, however, his work on lyric poetry has been somewhat neglected. This work, in its negotiation between the subjective and objective, the individual and the collective, is apposite not only for the present discussion, but for analysis of popular music lyrics in general. Adorno’s “On Lyric Poetry and Society” sets out to explore the dialectical relationship between the two titular concepts.

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ Boer lists some twenty citations of Adorno in the index of his book on Cave, more than any other critic.

⁶ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), xiii.

Adorno contends that the lyric is at its most socially engaged precisely when it does not engage directly with the social:

[I]mmersion in what has taken individual form elevates the lyric poem to the status of something universal by making manifest something not distorted, not grasped, not yet subsumed. It thereby anticipates, spiritually, a situation in which no false universality, that is, nothing profoundly particular, continues to fetter what is other than itself, the human. The lyric work hopes to gain universality through unrestrained individuation.⁷

According to Adorno, then, the lyric poem must be approached on its own terms, but within a historical understanding. Here it can be seen that the individual/community dialectic within Cave's work has a quality peculiar to the genre within which he has mainly worked; namely, the lyric,⁸ which by its nature is (or purports to be) the expression of the individual. Hence, to explore this dynamic further, Cave's work must be examined precisely *as* lyric.

It would seem so far that a lyric understanding must inevitably privilege the individual. Adorno, however, introduces a complication:

A collective undercurrent provides the foundation for all individual poetry. When that poetry actually bears the whole in mind and is not simply an expression of the privilege, refinement and gentility of those who can afford to be gentle, participation in this undercurrent is an essential part of the substantiality of the individual lyric as well; it is this

⁷ Theodor Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Notes to Literature Vol. One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 38.

⁸ The lyric as poetic genre and the sung lyric need not be considered synonymous for "lyric" as a critical category to apply to both, *mutatis mutandis*. See the Introduction for more on the relationship between the two.

undercurrent that makes language the medium in which the subject becomes more than a mere subject.⁹

In other words, this kind of collective undercurrent provides a link to the material that prevents the lyric from slipping away into impossible abstraction. It is this collective undercurrent that nuances the isolation of the individual in lyric, since language always maintains a link between the individual and the collective. Adorno provides an example:

Romanticism's link to the folk song is only the most obvious, certainly not the most compelling example of this. For Romanticism practices a kind of programmatic transfusion of the collective into the individual through which the individual lyric poem indulged in a technical illusion of universal cogency without that cogency characterising it inherently.¹⁰

Adorno has in mind more the surfacing of historical experience, covertly, in the lyric poem, mentioning Baudelaire, García Lorca and Brecht.¹¹ Yet the invocation of folk song cannot be ignored in relation to Cave, given the depth of his already acknowledged roots in folk music. While the folk tradition from which Cave borrows is not universally or unproblematically collective by any means, nor indeed are the nature of Cave's borrowings,¹² it remains the case that this undercurrent cannot be wholly dismissed. The most obvious example is *Murder Ballads*, in which two of the songs ("Stagger Lee" and "Henry Lee") are part-credited as "Traditional." The concept of authorship is at stake here: "Stagger Lee," for which Cave mostly took existing lyrics, is not included in Cave's *Complete Lyrics* (like the Bob Dylan cover "Death is Not the End" from the same album), but "Henry Lee," for which Cave rewrote the lyrics, is.¹³ In

⁹ Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," 45.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Chapter 1 for more on all of this.

¹³ In the bibliographic notes to the *Complete Lyrics*, it is listed as "traditional, with Nick Cave" (iv).

essence, Cave lays claim to some lyrics from this album, but not others,¹⁴ giving rise to an interplay between the collective and the individual at the level of authorship.

Adorno goes on to expand on how the role of language as link may be expressed:

The collective power of contemporary lyric poetry may be largely due to the linguistic and psychic residues of a condition that is not yet fully individuated, a state of affairs that is prebourgeois in the broadest sense – dialect.¹⁵

Unfortunately, Adorno does not expand on this fruitful point, but it is clear that what is at issue here is the register of language used and its class associations. This raises some questions for Cave, whose linguistic register veers from the demotic to the ornate, even archaic, often seamlessly. On the first Bad Seeds album, *From Her to Eternity*, “Well of Misery” uses archaic words like “lest” and “hither.” The next two songs, however, the title track and “Saint Huck,” both operate in a register clearly based on the southern USA as consumed through blues music. To illustrate this, here are the first four lines of “Well of Misery:”

Along crags and sunless cracks I go
 Up rib of rock, spine of stone
 I dare not slumber where the night winds whistle
 Lest her creeping soul clutch this heart of thistle (83)

And here are those of “From Her to Eternity:”

Ah wanna tell ya bout a girl
 You know, she lives in Room 29

¹⁴ The sleeve notes attribute the quotations from *Paradise Lost* in ‘Song of Joy’ to “Johnny Milton,” which is simultaneously a joke and a fastidious naming of sources.

¹⁵ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 46.

Why that's the one right up top a mine
 Ah start to cry, I start to cry-y (84)

Even the written rendering of these lyrics illustrates the difference, with those of 'From Her to Eternity' written phonetically in faux-southern dialect ("ah," "ya" etc.), while "Well of Misery" adheres to normative spelling. It seems that "From Her to Eternity" at least rings true with Adorno's claim of dialect in lyric as the vital link between individual expression and collective setting. But does this suggest that a song like "Well of Misery," written in a deliberately non-contemporary register, lacks this kind of link?

The study of rhetoric helps to understand how these kinds of registers of language may operate for Cave. Frith confronts a similar question from a different perspective:

There is [...] an inevitable tension in the popular lyric between its colloquial, vernacular language and its use in a "heightened," elevated way, framed by music. A pop song is ordinary language put to extraordinary use.¹⁶

He gives the example of the use of "non-colloquial language" by an artist like Bob Dylan in the midst of otherwise colloquial language, which, given the juxtaposition of 'Well of Misery' and 'From Her to Eternity,' is much like what is at stake here on a smaller scale. For Frith, this is less a problem than a set of possibilities:

[S]ongs can be used to explore the relationships of *different* languages – different ways of speaking – and in pop terms this has often meant challenging linguistic hierarchies, subverting the way words are used to dominate.¹⁷

¹⁶ Frith, 168.

¹⁷ Ibid., 168-9.

From this point of view, the juxtaposition of songs like ‘Well of Misery’ and ‘From Her to Eternity’ serves to break down the opposition that Adorno sets up between demotic and heightened registers. Rather than straightforwardly standing for the collective and the individualistic, the two can be implicitly intertwined such that the end result has distinct traces of both – very much like Adorno’s ideal of lyric poetry, in fact.

Early in his essay, Adorno identifies the “I” at the centre of lyric as giving the illusion of pure subjectivity, fundamentally alienated from objectivity; his contention is that the force with which this alienation is depicted amounts to an implicit depiction of that which is external to the “I”:

Even lyric works in which no trace of conventional and concrete existence, no crude materiality remains, the greatest lyric works in our language, owe their quality to the force with which the “I” creates the illusion of nature emerging from alienation.¹⁸

Jonathan Culler notes that Adorno is alive to the apparent absurdity of arguing that the lyric’s relation to society is most present precisely where it is *not* present, but that this argument is quite consistent with Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s views on the autonomy of art, whose aloofness allows it to become a form of resistance.¹⁹ The “I” is thus at the very centre of the dialectic around which Adorno’s argument is based, but also the source of a tension within that argument itself, albeit not an irresolvable one. It is fitting, then, to consider the “I” to be the central battleground of the lyric.

¹⁸ Adorno, “Lyric Poetry and Society,” 41.

¹⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015), 331.

The Lyric "I"

Who is the "I" in a given Nick Cave song? Two obvious answers present themselves: that it is Cave himself, or that it is a fictive speaker. To take "Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?," the first of these would presuppose that the song is a stylised rendering by Cave of actual experience, with himself at the centre, while the other would, as Steven Barfield does,²⁰ take the song as unfolding a wholly fictional narrative, complete with wholly fictional narrator. The implications of and reasons for the first answer will be examined in more detail below, but it is worth recognising that the reason why it presupposes autobiography is that transplanting the "real" Cave into a fictional narrative would compromise his reality and immediately render him fictional. Since this means that the introduction of a single invented element fatally undermines this model, it immediately appears that the fictive speaker model is far more fruitful, if only to avoid being extremely prescriptive. And indeed, as Culler notes, this has long been a dominant mode in Anglo-American lyric criticism: the poem as "fictive speech act" emanating from an imagined speaker.²¹

Barfield's reading of "Nowhere" is instructive here. He describes it first as utilising a "retrospective narrative strategy,"²² drawing attention to the manner in which the song has two major timeframes: a relationship remembered in the past tense, and a present-tense narrator.²³ These timeframes are often juxtaposed, for instance:

The kitten that padded and purred on my lap
Now swipes at my face with the paw of a bear (281)

²⁰ Steven Barfield, "'The Time of Our Great Undoing:' Love, Madness, Catastrophe and the Secret Afterlife of Romanticism in Nick Cave's Love Songs," *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 239-260.

²¹ Culler, 110. See also 115-116 for an attempt to explain the dominance of this model, drawing heavily on Herbert Tucker.

²² Barfield, 248.

²³ There is also, briefly, an imagined conditional future: "If they'd give me my clothes back then I could go home" (282), but this is quashed almost immediately.

This appears straightforward enough; a development suggested by contrast. As Barfield continues his analysis, however, the past-tense narrative turns out to be impossibly fragmentary and incoherent, and to require a good deal of “reconstruction,” in his terms,²⁴ to interpret. This is revealing phrasing, as “reconstruction” implies that there is something there to reconstruct, that there is an external narrative which the song only allows the audience brief glimpses into. This is, of course, not the case, certainly if one takes the fictive speaker model.²⁵ To give Barfield his due, he admits to this incoherence, but assumes it to be the point in itself, rather than a consequence of the manner in which he is reading the song.

“Nowhere” admits a further problem with the fictive speech act model. As Barfield notes, the interlocutor for the song is unclear.²⁶ Sometimes it is the former lover (“You come for me now with a cake that you’ve made” (281)), at others it appears to be someone else (“I remember a girl so very well” (281)). The narrator seems to supply details of the past that the former would not need, but which are impossibly gnomic, divorced of context, for anyone else. Furthermore, the very narrative incoherence that Barfield examines militates against this being a representation of the telling of a story – Barfield takes it to be a representation of madness,²⁷ but this is rather a leap, given that the only textual support is a clinical atmosphere (“chemical light” (281), “antiseptic air” (282)) and a sense of imprisonment which need by no means be read literally rather than as connoting isolation and loss. As such, the song cannot directly correspond to a real-world speech act. Rather, it is something far more protean and elusive.

²⁴ Barfield, 249.

²⁵ The “real Cave” model would actually allow for this kind of interpretation, since the speaker and hence the narrative would then exist outside of the song, but Barfield gives no indication of using this model.

²⁶ Barfield, 248.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

It appears, then, that the “real Cave” model is unstable, and the fictive speaker model is not always sufficient, at least in the strict mode that assumes a corresponding speech act. To do this, Culler takes Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s work as a paradigm of the fictive speech act concept:

[W]e may conceive of a poem as the imitation or representation of an utterance [...] It is an imitation in the same sense that a play is the imitation or representation of an action. Everything the poet “says” may be true, but his saying of it is not.²⁸

Smith goes on, on the basis of this, to presuppose the existence of a speaker²⁹ at the centre of the poem, and a general aesthetics of mimesis wherein the poem not only represents an utterance, but in doing so conjures a whole “scene” within which the utterance takes place.³⁰ Yet Culler notes that the very lyrics examined by Smith elide any attempt to relate them directly to a real-world speech act, much as “Nowhere” does.³¹

For Culler, Smith’s analysis opens up room for an alternative model, that of a purely poetic speech act which need not imply the existence of a fictional speaker. This alternative model has the advantage of allowing for three things which are obscured by the fictive speaker model: the “effects of presentness” of the lyric, the “materiality of lyric language that makes itself felt as something other than signs of a character and plot” (what might, in fact, be termed the distinctively “lyrical” quality of its language), and the web of intertextuality which places it in the world of lyric rather than the real world.³²

The first of these deserves some attention at this point. It has already been suggested in Chapter 2 that certain of Cave’s songs exhibit a temporal

²⁸ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 15.

²⁹ Who at times may in fact be the poet – Smith uses the ready example of Tennyson’s poems about Arthur Hallam’s death (16).

³⁰ Smith, 16-20.

³¹ Culler, 110-114.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

stasis, a frozen eternal present. At that point the point was specifically the apocalypse's arrest of teleology, but it should also be observed that the lyric is necessarily a frozen moment in time. Here another concept of Smith's is useful; that of "simultaneous composition," wherein the composition and generation of the poem are both simultaneous to its "action" (where appropriate).³³ Smith uses the example of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," in which the experience described throughout the poem in the present tense has finished by the final line: "Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?"³⁴ While Smith's account is concerned with the psychological status of the speaker (such as the apparent sequence of Keats's speaker's impressions and thoughts), there is nothing about this concept that necessarily suggests any kind of mimesis.

Simultaneous composition accounts for how concerned Cave's lyrics often are with their own situation in the present tense, especially given the kind of frozen timeframes encountered in Chapter 2. "This is the time" announces "Straight to You" at the beginnings of two consecutive lines (194), something recalled by the chorus of "Rings of Saturn" some 24 years later "And this is the moment/This is exactly what she is born to be."³⁵ The same album ends with the line "It's all right now," a moment of ambiguity given the evenness with which it is sung; is it *all right* now, or is it *all right now*?³⁶ The present moment is very much what concerns these lyrics; specifically, the present moment as experienced through the first person.

Before moving on, it should be noted that as important as Culler's intervention is, it need not necessarily suggest that the fictive speaker model is of no use. Throughout this thesis, I refer to songs having a "narrator"³⁷ - even in examining the insufficiency of this model with regard to "Nowhere" above.

³³ Smith, 127.

³⁴ Ibid., 127-8.

³⁵ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ See the Introduction for my justification of my use of this specific term.

The reason is simple – these songs, through their use of first-person pronouns, necessarily imply a central subject, even at times a narrative. This subject, however, is a lyrical construction. Sometimes they will be part of a narrative, other times they will exist only to give voice to the song. In the former cases at least, the fictive speaker model can in fact be justified and even fruitful, with the caveat that relating the song directly to a real-world utterance may well obfuscate matters. So long as the poetic character of the lyric text is not forgotten, it is perfectly legitimate to imagine this kind of central subject.

So if it can be fruitful to ascribe aspects of a fictional character to the poetic self of the lyric “I,” does the same hold true for the person of the author, the other possibility raised at the beginning of this section? This is the position of Käte Hamburger, who suggests that the I of the lyric, while not straightforwardly the author, cannot be entirely divorced from them either.³⁸ This makes perfect sense for most observers of pop music, for whom identifying the author’s and/or singer’s³⁹ feelings with those of the subject is a leap quite easily made. This accounts not only for the phenomenon of albums read primarily as “break-up” or “divorce” albums, including Frank Sinatra’s *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, Bob Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks*, Angel Olsen’s *MY WOMAN* and indeed Nick Cave’s *The Boatman’s Call*, but albums read straightforwardly through biography such as Sufjan Stevens’s *Carrie & Lowell*, an album seemingly centred around the death of Stevens’s mother.⁴⁰ Herbert Tucker suggests that the rise of the fictive speaker model came out of a desire for “unconditioned subjectivity,” a contextless self,⁴¹ yet something of the

³⁸ Cited in Culler, 106.

³⁹ I use “author” here to refer to the composer of the music/lyrics, but this is a contested term within musicology; see especially Keith Negus, “Authorship and the Popular Song,” *Music and Letters* 92.4 (Nov. 2011), 607-629.

⁴⁰ While the paratext of this album (sleeve notes, cover image, interviews) support this autobiographical reading, the songs occupy a number of subject positions, complicating matters significantly.

⁴¹ Herbert Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2014), 152.

same is true here – the reader of the text, whatever form that takes, desires contact with the subject, which, mediated by the singer’s voice, is more likely to be associated directly with that singer than with a fictional creation. This, then, opens up a difficult question: what, if anything, is the relationship between the subjectivity of Nick Cave’s lyrics, and that of Nick Cave the author and performer?

Biography

This, then, inevitably reopens the question of Cave’s biography and its relevance to any serious study of his work. Biographical consideration, if not prevalence, has found its way into most if not all approaches to his work. Reinhard Kleist’s graphic novel *Nick Cave: Mercy on Me*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, presupposes a necessary, if indeterminate, relationship between Cave’s life and the mythology of his work. As a rule, interviews with him are predicated on an implicit link between access to the author and understanding of the work. Even in academic work, John H. Baker’s introduction to one of the two existing collections of academic essays dedicated to Cave studies begins with biography:

Few who were lucky enough to witness a gig by The Birthday Party would have imagined that the snarling madman on vocals would live much beyond his mid-twenties [...] Flick forward to 2012. Cave is now 54 years old, married and a father.⁴²

Of course, a single-author study inevitably privileges the figure of the author to some degree by its very nature – the present work is no exception. What stands out here, however, is specifically the focus on biographical teleology, the contrast between the “snarling madman” and the family man. This play of

⁴² John H. Baker, “Introduction: Nick Cave, Twenty-First Century Man,” *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 3.

contrasts is a common way to introduce work on Cave,⁴³ which speaks to the degree to which it is privileged as in some way carrying meaning. To put the matter simply, Cave's life and work are generally assumed to have at least some relationship, such that elucidating one will shed light on the other.

It should be stressed that this biographical focus is by no means a purely critical invention. On the contrary, Cave himself has frequently drawn a direct link between his life and his work. Both of his lectures, "The Secret Life of the Love Song" and "The Flesh Made Word" are ultimately autobiographical. Both concern themselves with a specific mode in which Cave has written; the former his love songs, the latter his Biblical engagement.⁴⁴ Much of "Secret Life" is focused on Cave's relationship with his father, and the manner in which, in his view, this has coloured his subsequent career. This is a favourite theme of Cave's – it turns up in less detail in "The Flesh Made Word," as well as in *20,000 Days on Earth*, and is a frequent topic of conversation in interviews.⁴⁵ This forms a curious kind of complicity between Cave and his interviewers – here is a topic that is clearly demarcated as important and that will therefore produce useful and stimulating material.

Another topic that is of continual interest to interviewers⁴⁶ is the background of Cave's 1997 album *The Boatman's Call*. The album was written and recorded at the time of both the break-up of Cave's relationship with

⁴³ The interviews collected in *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint* include two particularly clear examples of this, one by Barney Hoskyns from 2004, the other by Simon Hattenstone from 2008 (146-153, 185-192). Even their titles, "Old Saint Nick" and "Old Nick" respectively, exhibit a similar focus on Cave as (reformed) devil, or fallen angel.

⁴⁴ Something picked up as well with slightly different emphasis (but still with strong autobiographical overtones) in his contemporary introduction to the Gospel of Mark.

⁴⁵ For example, Cave's father comes up in both interviews with Phil Sutcliffe in *Sinner Saint* (155-178, 193-238). In the first instance, Sutcliffe raises the topic; in the second, Cave does so without prompting.

⁴⁶ *Skeleton Tree* holds a similar appeal for biographical framing, but Cave has done very few media interviews since its release. The *Red Hand Files*, in which he answers fan questions directly, however, contains a number of questions about grief implicitly or explicitly drawn from listening to the album and/or watching *One More Time with Feeling*, overtly presented as in part an element of that album's paratext.

Viviane Carneiro and his tumultuous but short-lived relationship with P.J. Harvey. From the album's release to the present day, questions about it have tended to focus on Harvey's role as inspiration – are the songs, to put the matter simply, “about” her? This is at least partly informed by Harvey's fame and status as a contemporary of Cave's, but behind this salaciousness is something else – a desire for connection, for something sincere and genuine, to know that what is being heard is real emotion. For his part, at times Cave, especially in the years following the album, appeared understandably unwilling to talk about his personal life:

‘People Ain’t No Good’ seems to relate the collapse of your relationship with Viviane.

Well, yes it does.

[...]

Did you have any misgivings about identifying P.J. Harvey so clearly or identifying your relationship so intimately?

I don't know that I did.⁴⁷

In other interviews, however, especially later, he seems to happily own *The Boatman's Call* as an autobiographical record, “reporting what was going on in my life in the most melodramatic way.”⁴⁸ In “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” delivered in 1999, he directly connects “Far From Me,” from the album, to an actual relationship, saying that the song was written over the course of the relationship. This has the effect of linking composition with biography

⁴⁷ James McNair, “The Return of the Saint,” *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint: The Complete Interviews*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 86-87. This interview was originally published in the month of the album's release.

⁴⁸ Jessamy Calkin, “Let There Be Light,” *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint: The Complete Interviews*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 113. This interview was published in 2001.

temporally rather than just on the level of influence, and so deepens the connection between the two.

Seen in the light of direct biographical influence, *The Boatman's Call* appears to be another wave in what Rhian E. Jones calls "[the 90s]'s flood of confessional art."⁴⁹ The term "confessional," suggesting healing through articulation (whether this proceeds from one's peers or from God), as well as placing an author in a genealogy going back to Augustine, in a modern context brings to mind the poetry of Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell, which Ariana Phillips-Hutton, drawing on David Shumway, connects to the contemporary work of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen.⁵⁰ At the very least, then, the confessional in this mode must be something Cave is aware of, as he has cited Plath as one of his favourite poets,⁵¹ and Dylan and Cohen are his oft-acknowledged influences. Of course, as Phillips-Hutton acknowledges, the confessional in musical performance is, at best, complicated by its existence in "an aesthetic setting in which multiple actors (musicians, audiences, marketing teams, etc.) are present."⁵² Yet the illusion of direct contact persists, especially when Cave, for instance, does a solo performance of "Into My Arms," as he frequently does at live concerts, stripping mediation back to a minimum. The same is true of the recorded version of the song, which features only Cave on piano and vocals and Martyn P. Casey on (almost inaudible) bass. The effect is to create a sense of intimacy (one which is still, as Phillips-Hutton notes of a similar case, mediated by technology, but which seeks to obscure this fact⁵³), the atmosphere of a confessional, in which the only presences are Cave and the listener (and, perhaps, God, though presumably not the "interventionist God" dismissed in the first line of "Into My Arms" (273)). While other songs on *The*

⁴⁹ Rhian E. Jones, *Clampdown: Pop Cultural Wars on Class and Gender* (Winchester: Zero, 2013), 43.

⁵⁰ Ariana Phillips-Hutton, "Private Words, Public Emotions: Performing Confession in Indie Music," *Popular Music* 37.3 (2018), 330.

⁵¹ Nick Cave, "Issue 25," *The Red Hand Files*. February 2019. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

⁵² Phillips-Hutton, 330.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 341.

Boatman's Call feature the rest of the Bad Seeds, Cave's voice continues to be higher in the mix, closer to the audience, than on any other album. On this most apparently biographical of albums, it is a telling choice: the autobiographical and the intimate come together, one emphasising the other.

Boer has done good work not only in drawing attention to the predominance of biography in Cave studies, but in highlighting the extent to which this constitutes Cave attempting to direct interpretation of his work.⁵⁴ Cave's complicity in biographical readings, demonstrated above, functions as the artist giving his blessing to a particular mode or frame of criticism, and hence giving this kind of work an apparent added legitimacy. Beyond this more general point, however, Boer draws attention to how Cave's writing of autobiography is linked directly to theological and specifically Biblical discourse, most obviously in "The Flesh Made Word." In turn, other writers' use of biography becomes Biblically infused. Note the titles or headings of the interviews cited over the last few paragraphs: "The Return of the Saint," "Let There Be Light," "Old Saint Nick," "Old Nick." All of these frame Cave by way of religious discourse, whether as a demonic figure or a saintly one.⁵⁵ Moreover, the link is not one-sided, and discussion of Cave's theology often ends up being biographically infused. John H. Baker's own essay in the collection from which his earlier-cited introduction is taken analyses Cave's interactions with Christianity on a chronology of his work from the Birthday Party to "The Flesh Made Word."⁵⁶ This has the effect of reducing the nuances of Cave's theological engagement, particularly in the 80s and early 90s, to a teleological progression in the direction of becoming a "Christian artist," not to mention obscuring the

⁵⁴ It should be noted that Boer's book on Cave was published in 2012, before the release of both *20,000 Days on Earth* and *One More Time with Feeling*, which constitute a very direct intervention by Cave in the critical reception of his work, as discussed in the previous chapter.

⁵⁵ A dichotomy made plain in the title of the collection from which all of these particular interviews are taken: *Sinner Saint*.

⁵⁶ John H. Baker, "Nick Cave: Christian Artist?" *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 219-238.

changes in theological focus of Cave's later work from that of the late 90s and early 2000s.⁵⁷ This is a shame, given Baker's otherwise salutary attention to, for instance, elements of Gnosticism throughout Cave's work, which might undermine this kind of straightforward progression.

It should be said that Boer himself falls into a similar trap of teleological biography at times. His chapter on Cave's Christology begins:

In about the year 1988, a major event in music history happened: at the same time that Nicholas Edward Cave made his first serious effort to give up heroin he also became rather interested in Jesus.⁵⁸

The rather bombastic tone suggests an element of irony, though he does go on to accept the critical cliché of Cave's "Old Testament" and "New Testament" periods.⁵⁹ This is all the stranger for Boer's resolute and sceptical attention to Cave's likening of himself to Christ in "The Flesh Made Word" and, more implicitly, his introduction to the Gospel of Mark.⁶⁰ The clearest example of this is in the note on which the former finishes: "Like Christ, I too come in the name of my father, to keep God alive."⁶¹ The extent to which this is part of a pattern can be seen by the ubiquitous invocation of Cave's father. For Cave, Christ is the paragon of the creative individual (this being the source of his divinity), and so this makes Cave, as artist, himself a locus of divinity. Boer's objection to this is not so much that it is egotistical as that it is bad theology. Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno, Boer paints this as a narrow Christology which swerves into idolatry, deifying the human and thus substituting the finite for

⁵⁷ See Chapter 6 for more on these developments.

⁵⁸ Boer, 72.

⁵⁹ Robert Eaglestone argues that this division is overly simplistic, that Cave's material throughout his career has been marked by a complex dynamic between the Testaments (170-172). I would add that, from a culturally Christian perspective, to associate the Old Testament with retributive and punitive violence and the New with peace and salvation (the assumption inherent in this division) comes dangerously close to anti-Semitic rhetoric.

⁶⁰ See Boer 5 and 7-8.

⁶¹ Nick Cave, "The Flesh Made Word," *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997), 142.

the infinite.⁶² Moreover, Cave's invocation of Christ ties this form of Christology to celebrity culture, and specifically to the rock music industry's sanctification of the individual artist. In deifying the human, Boer argues, all sense of divine mystery is stripped away in favour of making God accessible; "[t]he finite stands in for the infinite."⁶³

This kind of idolatry is literalised most clearly in Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's⁶⁴ 2014-2019 comic book series *The Wicked and the Divine*, in which twelve gods are incarnated as contemporary pop stars,⁶⁵ serving as a locus for a worship that parallels contemporary fandom. Over the course of the series, the gods' divine nature proves to be part of a long con on the part of their advisor Ananke, who manipulates them and ultimately aims to use them as sacrifices to prolong her own life. Though the gods' power is genuine, there is a sinister and malevolent intent behind it – a metaphor for the machinations of the music industry. *The Wicked and the Divine* walks a careful line, depicting the deification of pop stars enthusiastically and with clear affection, while remaining sceptical of its implications. Gillen and McKelvie take care to ensure that the reader sees most of the gods, in flashback, in their "human" form before their divine nature was revealed to them by Ananke, while in the final issues the main character, Laura Wilson, sheds her divine identity (Persephone) and proves that her powers are not necessarily tied to that identity. Moreover, the series' frequent affectionate attention to fan culture (most obviously, Laura begins as a fan, only being incarnated as a god in issue 11) ensures that its focus always remains on humanity rather than divinity. Gillen and McKelvie's objection here is the

⁶² Boer, 8-9.

⁶³ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁴ Gillen and McKelvie's previous collaborations include *Phonogram*, in which obsessive love and fandom of music grants magical powers.

⁶⁵ These pop star gods are based overtly on specific individuals, including David Bowie (Lucifer), Prince (Inanna), Rihanna (Sakhmet), and Kanye West (Baal). The character of Baphomet/Nergal is based, in appearance at least, on Cave.

opposite of Boer's; the deification of the rock star does damage not to God, but to the human, the real locus of creativity.

There is, however, another danger to this deification. Where both Boer's and Gillen/McKelvie's are external criticisms founded on abstract issues, this danger is one that is dramatized by Cave himself within his work. This alternate perspective returns us to talking about the subject from its own perspective. For the subject, the self, is ultimately, for Cave, what is at stake and what is most threatened by its own raising to divine status.

Self-Destructive Desire

A recurring feature of Cave's work, stretching across his whole career, is the concept of desire, and more particularly erotic and/or romantic desire. As an illustration of the prevalence of this motif, here are some lines from the first song in Cave's *Complete Lyrics*, "Zoo-Music Girl:"

The sound of her young legs in stockings
 The rhythm of her walk, it's beautiful
 [...]
 My body is a monster driven insane
 My Heart is a fish toasted by flames
 [...]
 If there is one thing I desire in the world
 Is to make love to my Zoo-Music Girl (23)

This kind of obsessive sexual desire is particularly characteristic of Cave's Birthday Party and early Bad Seeds lyrics.⁶⁶ A different kind of desire can be glimpsed on "Skeleton Tree," some 35 years later:

⁶⁶ Further examples include "Kewpie Doll," "Wild World," "Wings Off Flies," "Sad Waters," "Hard On for Love," and "Watching Alice."

I call out
 I call out
 Right across the sea
 But the echo comes back empty⁶⁷

The longing expressed here is, if less visceral and more abstract than that of “Zoo-Music Girl,” still palpable. Regardless of its specifics, desire is, at root, an expression of the subject. Cave himself has said that “the Love Song is the sound of our endeavours to become God-like, to rise up and above the earth-bound and the mediocre.”⁶⁸ So desire, as expressed in the love song, is, for Cave, the impulse towards deification, while the love song, as a creative act expressing this impulse, enacts the process of deification.

Here, however, a complication arises. As Barfield observes, desire in Cave’s work is frequently destructive, rather than procreative.⁶⁹ Barfield likens Cave’s “Where the Wild Roses Grow” to William Blake’s “The Sick Rose,” with the former enacting the allegory of the latter. One of the narrators of the song murders his lover as a direct result of his desire for her:

As I kissed her goodbye, I said ‘All beauty must die’
 And lent down and planted a rose between her teeth (251)

The violence of the act is less unnerving (especially in its context on *Murder Ballads*) than the tenderness surrounding it. Unlike in the song’s twin, “Henry Lee,”⁷⁰ this murder is not motivated by jealousy, but by desire and aesthetic appreciation. Indeed, apart from these two examples, two other songs on *Murder Ballads* (“Song of Joy” and “Lovely Creature”) feature the murder of one

⁶⁷ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

⁶⁸ Nick Cave, “The Secret Life of the Love Song,” *The Complete Lyrics: 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013), 7.

⁶⁹ Barfield, 245.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 1 for more on the twinning of these two songs.

lover by another, while, on a different and more gendered⁷¹ note of destructive desire, “Stagger Lee,” “The Kindness of Strangers” and “Crow Jane” all feature rape. In all of these songs, then, desire, the impulse towards divinity, directly results in the violation of others. This also accounts for the staggering number of women who meet violent ends in Cave’s early work.⁷²

Already, then, the deification impulse is morally questionable. Yet there is another aspect to this focus on desire which strikes at the heart of what the self is in Cave’s work. As has been observed at length in this chapter and the previous one, Cave’s narrators are frequently isolated, whether by choice or otherwise. This does not, however, deprive them of desire; it may only sharpen its edge. But without an external locus for this desire, its destructive force can only be directed inwards, and become *self*-destructive. “From Her to Eternity” plays on the obsessive desire of its narrator for the woman in the room above his:

O ah hear her walkin
 Walkin barefoot cross the floor-boards
 All through this lonesome night
 And ah hear her crying too
 Hot tears come splashin down
 Leakin through the cracks
 Down upon my face, ah catch em in my mouth! (84)

The unsettling image of the “lonesome” narrator drinking the tears which leak through from the room above in an attempt to connect is carried forward in further verses; in the second he climbs into the woman’s room and steals a page

⁷¹ The victim of the rape in “Stagger Lee” is male, while those in the other two songs are female. The rapists in all three songs are male.

⁷² Examples, apart from the aforementioned: “6” Gold Blade,” “Deep in the Woods,” “Your Funeral, My Trial” (by inference, at least), “The Mercy Seat” (again, by inference), “Loom of the Land.” Elsewhere, women are associated directly with violence as cause or instigator: “Deanna,” “John Finn’s Wife,” “Swampland” et al.

from her diary, while in the third he presses his ear to the ceiling and fantasises about the stockings she is wearing. By the end of the song, though, the narrator proves to be surprisingly self-aware:

This desire to possess her is a wound
 And it's naggin at me like a shrew
 But ah know that to possess her
 Is therefore not to desire her (85)

The characterisation of the desire as “like a wound” is telling. The narrator’s increasingly extreme behaviour is a reflection of an internal torment. Yet he refuses to reach out to the woman in any meaningful way, preferring to bask in his obsession. This is, it is very clear, an entirely self-inflicted wound.

“From Her to Eternity” is one of Cave’s signature songs, performed at almost every Bad Seeds performance, and so it ought not be surprising that the self-destruction it depicts is another motif across Cave’s entire career. “Slowly Goes the Night,” (hereafter “Slowly”) from the 1988 album *Tender Prey*, is a particularly clear illustration.⁷³ Like “From Her to Eternity,” “Slowly” externalises internal violence, but where that song’s manic energy gives it a cathartic feel, “Slowly” is a dirgelike song of internal entropy. In a familiar scene for Cave songs (not to say popular music in general), the song’s narrator melancholically laments his recently departed lover. To begin with, the loss is figured primarily by way of emptiness:

Next to me lies your body plan
 Like the map of some forbidden land
 I trace the ghosts of your bones

⁷³ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Tender Prey*, Mute, 1988. This recorded version features significantly different lyrics to the ones published in the *Complete Lyrics*. Quotations are from the recorded version, though I have followed the general pattern of the published lyrics in their typesetting.

With my trembling hand

Here only the doubled reference to death (“ghosts [...] bones”) is even remotely suggestive of destruction. Yet as the song progresses, it develops a cyclical emotional violence:

I watch the moon get flayed each night
Until the moon becomes the skinning knife.

The moon here stands in for the narrator himself, subject to emotional turmoil such that he believes himself to be an instrument of destruction. Like the narrator of “From Her to Eternity,” he understands that his misery is self-inflicted. By the end of the song he is choosing to retreat into fantasy, in a state explicitly likened to death, in the hopes of satisfying his desire:

Call it sleep, call it death, call it what you like
But only sleep
Only sleep brings you back to life

At the other end of Cave’s career from “From Her to Eternity,” released in 1984,⁷⁴ is “Girl in Amber,” from *Skeleton Tree* in 2016.⁷⁵ “Girl in Amber” takes on the kind of frozen apocalyptic timescales seen in Chapter 2, but in this instance compressed down to a personal level:

Girl in amber trapped forever
Spinning down the hall
[...]
I knew the world it would stop spinning now
Since you’ve been gone.

⁷⁴ A date referenced in the lyrics of “Girl in Amber,” presumably on the basis that it was the year of the Bad Seeds’ first release.

⁷⁵ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

The idea of “spinning” recurs throughout the song, a hypnotic motion whose stilling (“the song it spins, it spins no more”) stands for a broader stasis. It is broadened out over the course of the song from the (absent? Former?) lover to the world itself; in this way, the significance of a romantic relationship is exaggerated out to planetary scale.⁷⁶ Like the assault on the moon in “Slowly,” this gives the sense of loss on which the song is built cosmic significance, at least in the mind of the narrator. The entire world has come to a standstill in the absence of his lover.

For the most sustained example of this kind of self-annihilation, I return once again to “Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?” which combines elements of the previous examples into one whole. “Nowhere” comes from *The Boatman’s Call*, an album roughly contemporary to “The Flesh Made Word” and its claim on behalf of the Christlike artist (specifically the Christlike Cave), as well as being a favourite target for reading Cave’s work biographically. For these reasons, it stands at the nexus of the kinds of claims about the self, about the lyric “I,” and about biography that have been under examination in this chapter. As such, it demands some detailed examination.

“Nowhere” is yet another song about a narrator with an absent lover, but here things are rather less clear-cut than in the previous examples. As noted above, the song involves two timeframes, present and past (there is, significantly, no use of the future tense in the song – any sense of future has been annihilated). Yet the way in which they are presented to the audience differs sharply. The song begins with the words “I remember a girl” (281), and the same words begin the fifth verse as well. Throughout, the present is invaded by memories and images of the past. These are in fact balanced: five of the song’s ten verses are broadly to do with the present, the other five with the

⁷⁶ “There She Goes, My Beautiful World” does something similar in its chorus and title by implicitly playing on the “girl/world” rhyme which is a cliché in pop music, but “Girl in Amber” does not share this playfulness.

past. Yet the present is “clean, antiseptic” (282), “chemical,” (281) while the past is associated with a carnival, seen in the first and ninth verses (281-282). The song’s final verse, meanwhile, expresses the narrator’s desire to revisit the past:

If I could relive one day of my life
 If I could relive just a single one
 You on the balcony, my future wife
 O who could have known but no one (282)

It should be noted that the narrator expresses no desire to change anything in the past, but simply to “relive” it, the clearest indicator of his melancholic fixation. The past is presented as a place of vitality, where the present is frozen, lifeless.

The clearest image of this disconnect between present and past comes with the two glimpses of a child in the song. The first comes in the fourth verse:

Across clinical benches with nothing to talk
 Breathing tea and biscuits and the Serenity Prayer
 While the bones of our child crumble like chalk (281)

This arresting image is given no immediate context, at least until the figure of a child recurs in the ninth verse:

From the balcony we watched the carnival band
 The crack of the drum a little child did scare
 I can still feel his fingers pressed in my hand (282)

The apparent existence of a child alive in the past of the song and dead in the present seem to suggest, if not quite a causality, at least a narrative. Yet, as Barfield concludes after attempting to construct a narrative, the pieces offered by the song are far too fragmentary for this.⁷⁷ Rather, the child stands in for the

⁷⁷ Barfield, 252.

narrator and his lover's relationship: alive and in a position of intimacy (holding hands) in the past, dead and decaying in the present. This is the most vivid expression of the kind of imagery of violence and death seen in "From Her to Eternity" and "Slowly," which here all belongs to the present. The former lover is referred to as a "ravaged avenger" who brings a cake "full of glass and bleach and my old razor blades" (281). Earlier in the song she has been a "kitten that [...] now swipes at my face with the paw of a bear" (281). This kind of past/present contrast recurs in the song's fifth verse:

I remember a girl so bold and so bright
 Loose-limbed and laughing and brazen and bare
 Sits gnawing her knuckles in the chemical light

The harmony evoked by the alliteration of the first two lines plays against the harsh image of the "chemical light" and the starkness of the lover "gnawing her knuckles," an act of self-harm that also suggests a kind of devolution or entropy. Here, unusually, the audience is presented with two characters who have been ground down by desire.

The role of desire in this slow self-destruction is made explicit in the second verse:

In a colonial hotel we fucked up the sun
 And then we fucked it down again
 Well the sun comes up and the sun goes down
 Going round and around to nowhere (281)

In this instance, the phrase "fucked up the sun" is used with pointed ambiguity; it refers here to the sheer length of the lovers' sexual liaisons, yet "fucked up" also bears its usual meaning of something being destroyed or rendered useless. Here, as with the moon in "Slowly" and the world in "Girl in Amber," the lovers' relationship is given a cosmic significance. And here, very clearly, the

acting out of desire is linked directly to its consequences for the lovers themselves.

There is a further theological significance to the isolation from which the narrators of all of these examples suffer, one underlined by Cave himself. "The Flesh Made Word" begins:

Jesus said, "Wherever two or more are gathered together, I am in their midst." Jesus said this because wherever two or more are gathered together, there is communion, there is language, there is imagination, there is God.⁷⁸

So if community has this inherent connection to the experience of grace, it follows that lacking it puts one further from God. The narrators of the songs seen through this chapter do not experience this kind of communion. The narrator of "From Her to Eternity" is unwilling to attempt to communicate with the object of his desire, while that of "Slowly" cannot.⁷⁹ As seen, the narrator of "Girl in Amber" receives no communication from the outside world - "the phone it rings no more." The narrator of "Nowhere" seems to have his former lover with him, but they are explicitly described as having "nothing to talk [about]" (281). It might be argued that this is an example of Adorno's "unrestrained [lyric] individuation," and hence that the social is revealed precisely in this isolation, but even if true, this is entirely external to the songs. Lacking the experience of community and communication, these narrators fall into an abject state of disintegration, hopelessly distanced from God.

⁷⁸ "The Flesh Made Word," 137.

⁷⁹ The song itself is directed to the erstwhile lover, but there is no sense that this line of communication may be reciprocal.

Conclusion

This concept of the ultimately destructive self, so consistent across Cave's career, is contradictory to Cave's positioning of the Christlike artist, the divine self. As is likely clear by now, I share both Boer's and Gillen/McKelvie's issues with the latter. While the concept of divine creativity inherent to the individual is appealing, Cave's extension of it to messianic levels raises difficult issues.⁸⁰ Fortunately, this is a clear example of the work being more robust and defensible in its theology than the artist, as the notion of self-destructive desire shows up the dangers of this kind of deification.

What is more, this leads us to the conclusion of the complex individual/community dynamic traced in Cave's work through the last two chapters. Cave's work, and his stated theology and philosophy, are clearly individualistic, in both a broadly Romantic tradition and the tradition of the contemporary music industry. Yet his work, and the manner in which it is presented, also cannot be understood outside of a broadly communitarian viewpoint. The narrators of "When I First Came to Town" and "O'Malley's Bar" define themselves precisely by their distance from the communities that surround them. The inherent divinity of the individual can only be expressed through language,⁸¹ through communication with others. For this reason, as will be seen further in the next chapter, the love song is crucial to Cave's theology.

⁸⁰ He has, it should be noted, abandoned this line of thought since the late 90s, though he continues to laud creativity as a link to God.

⁸¹"I found that through the use of language I was writing God into existence. Language became the blanket that I threw over the invisible man, which gave him shape and form." ("The Secret Life of the Love Song," 6)

Chapter 6: Push the Sky Away: Nick Cave, Heretic

“They told us our gods would outlive us
They told us our dreams would outlive us
They told us our gods would outlive us
But they lied” – “Distant Sky”¹

Everything presented in this thesis so far suggests Cave as an artist with heterodox trappings who nonetheless fits broadly into a Christian theological tradition. Yet any attempt to tie him down within that tradition must inevitably result in failure. Not for nothing does John H. Baker require a question mark for the title of his article “‘There is a Kingdom:’ Nick Cave, Christian Artist?”² While Cave certainly has, as has been observed, affinities with the Lutheran existentialist perspective of Kierkegaard, the Calvinist predestination of Barth or, more broadly, Gnostic concepts of a fallen world, the mere fact that he has affinities with such disparate currents of thought suggests his heterodoxy. Cave is, as he is frequently at pains to point out, of no organised church.³ He is, in short, a heretic.

It should be made clear that I mean no value judgement in referring to Cave as a heretic. I take heresy, following David Christie-Murray’s definition, to mean an individual belief, or set of beliefs, that departs from orthodoxy – “a doctrine which is at variance with orthodox religious teaching.”⁴ Like Boer, I return to the original meaning of *hairesis* (*αἵρεσις*), denoting the choice of an

¹ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

² John H. Baker, “‘There is a Kingdom:’ Nick Cave, Christian Artist?” *The Art of Nick Cave*, ed. John H. Baker (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 219-238.

³ See, for instance, Phil Sutcliffe, “Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 1,” *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 172. This particular interview is from 2004, but the line is consistent.

⁴ David Christie-Murray, *A History of Heresy* (London: New English Library, 1976), 1.

individual,⁵ and these concepts of choice and the individual are crucial – a heresy is not a heresy for a community for whom it is the accepted religious thinking. So Cave's heresy is inherent within the theology that emerges through his work as seen so far, a patchwork assemblage of images and themes that duck in and out of disparate traditions: both Jewish and Christian millenarianism (chapter 2), Gnostic concepts of a fallen world (chapter 3), a neo-Calvinist doctrine of revelatory election (chapter 4), a communal experience of grace combined with the notion of the individual as a locus of divinity (chapter 5). It is the combination of these beliefs that is heretical, since they do not co-exist easily within any orthodox framework. Moreover, as will be seen throughout this chapter, these various positions are not internally consistent within his work. This is, again, not a criticism: it would be unfair to expect a fixed, consistent theological position from an artist like Cave, and the kind of spiritual explorations he conducts are of at least as much interest for a critic as a single doctrinaire position.

Yet Cave's theological positions are not chaotic or random. Rather, there is a development of thought running through his work. Baker sees this, but, as noted previously, takes this development to mean Cave engaging more with the Bible and coming into contact with a form of Christianity around the time of *The Boatman's Call* in 1997, the endpoint of this development. As well as being overly teleological, what this account misses is how Cave's primary theological current has altered significantly in the years since *The Boatman's Call*. To put the matter simply, he has come to be far more interested in the human than the purely divine, in earth than in heaven.

⁵ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012), 83.

The Divine Body

Baker does acknowledge “the lack of explicitly Christian songs in Cave’s recent catalogue”⁶ – by “explicitly Christian,” he seems to mean devotional or cohering to orthodox theology, given that he references the 2004 song “Get Ready for Love,” a song whose gospel music-inflected call-and-response vocals and subject matter of a search for God’s presence place it in a clearly Christian context. The crucial point is, as Baker notes, where God is ultimately located:

Then I was just hanging around, doing nothing and looked up to see
His face burned in the retina of your eyes (384)

God is here identified not only with earthly romantic love, but with the bodily, placed within the human body. The same identification comes in 2001’s “Gates to the Garden:” “God is in this hand that I hold” (334). This draws a direct link between the spiritual divine presence and the carnal.

It must be acknowledged that this concern for the human does not entirely post-date 1997. *The Boatman’s Call* itself is suffused with this kind of anthropocentric theology. The first song of the album, “Into My Arms,” professes not to believe in either “an interventionist God” and “the existence of angels,” but nonetheless invokes both as support for the narrator’s love (273). Boer refers to this paradoxical movement as “the fusion of the love of and faith in a woman with the love of and faith in God.”⁷ This is, then, where the placement of God within the human is occurring. Like both “Get Ready for Love” and “Gates to the Garden,” if less directly than either, “Into My Arms” identifies God directly with romantic love.

This particular strand of Cave’s theology is reminiscent of the “Romantic Theology” of Charles Williams. Williams used the word “Romantic” (usually capitalised) here advisedly:

⁶ Baker, 235.

⁷ Boer, 63.

I keep the word Romantic for three reasons. The first is that there is no other word so convenient for describing that particular kind of sexual love. The second is that it includes other loves besides the sexual. The third is that in following the Dantean record of his love it may be possible to understand something more of Romanticism itself, and of its true and false modes of being. The word should not be too narrowly confined to a literary manner. It defines an attitude, a manner of receiving experience.⁸

In this way, Romantic Theology has to do both with romantic love in particular, and with Romanticism as an openness to subjective experience. The foundation of this theology is in what Williams calls “the Way of Affirmation,” by which the likeness of God is discerned in other images of creation.⁹ Williams associates this approach with Wordsworth and (at more length) Dante, with the distinction that where Wordsworth found Affirmation in his surroundings, Dante found it most specifically in the figure of Beatrice. Beatrice becomes, if not an image of divinity directly, at least one suggestive of it. In his analysis of Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, Williams suggests that Beatrice is associated directly with salvation (“*salute*”), “the image and the foretaste of salvation.”¹⁰ Beatrice is not in herself divine, but, in keeping with the experiential aspect of Romanticism emphasised by Williams, the experience of love which she represents for Dante is shaded with divinity. This is also true of “Into My Arms,” in which the placement of the lover into a metaphysical context inevitably lends her an aspect of divinity:

And I don’t believe in the existence of angels
But looking at you I wonder if that’s true
But if I did I would summon them together

⁸ Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice: A Study in Dante* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

And ask them to watch over you (273)

Not only is the mere sight of the lover enough to sow doubt in the narrator's disbelief, the two successive lines beginning "but" suggest an ongoing internal dissent, a transfiguration in which the lover is shading between human and angelic form.

The development of this comes with "Brompton Oratory," only three songs later on *The Boatman's Call*. In this song, the narrator enters a church on Pentecost and thinks about his absent lover. At first, the point is the contrast between divine presence and the absence so keenly felt by the narrator that he wishes to be made of stone:

The reading is from Luke 24
 Where Christ returns to his loved ones
 I look at the stone apostles
 Think that it's all right for some (278)

Luke 24 concerns the resurrection of Christ and his appearances to the apostles, the original community of faith, and so the narrator's isolation is underscored by his hearing this story while participating in such a community. This dynamic of contrast, however, is quickly complicated:

The blood imparted in little sips
 The smell of you still on my hands
 As I bring the cup up to my lips (278)

Here, once again, divine and human love are fused, but this time with the kind of carnal element seen in later songs. The real Brompton Oratory is a Catholic church, and so Cave's use of it as the title and location for this song dovetails with the reference to transubstantiation in these lines. Transubstantiation, like the resurrection of Luke 24, is the infusion of spiritual essence into a carnal vessel, and here it is placed alongside both the narrator's and his lover's bodies.

Boer suggests that the reference to “the smell of you” along with the menstrual image of blood and the yonic image of a cup of wine (all the more erotic for being in contact with the narrator’s lips) all suggest a taboo, vaguely heretical invasion of the sexual into the church space.¹¹ Yet this in itself is nothing new. As Boer himself notes, the cup of wine image recalls the Song of Songs, itself a Biblical text concerned with an erotic relationship, while various heretical sects have connected the sexual with the sacred.¹² What is of more significance is the location of the divine within the beloved’s body.

At first glance, this conferral of a divine status upon sexuality might seem to be yet another element linking Cave with at least some Gnostic thought. While some Gnostic teachers practiced complete asceticism, some Valentinian sects are known to have practiced orgiastic ritual expressions of sexuality.¹³ Even those Valentinians who did not go so far in their rituals praised sexual union between a man and a woman as symbolic of the union of the masculine and feminine principles in the universe, the “last repose” which awaits the Gnostic at the end of their spiritual journey.¹⁴ There is, however, a significant difference. For the Gnostics, sexual union was sacred precisely as a symbol of higher truths. Cave, however, emphasises the bodily reality, as seen in the references to vaginal fluids in “Brompton Oratory,” or, more crudely, in a song like the earlier “Hard on for Love:”

The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want
 But he leadeth me like a lamb to the lips
 Of the mouth of the valley of the shadow of death¹⁵
 I am his rod and his staff

¹¹ Boer, 64.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, trans. Anthony Alcock (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990),

¹⁴ Ibid., 141.

¹⁵ As much as Cave associates sexuality with the divine, he has at times exhibited a troublingly misogynistic tendency to associate vaginas with death, as here or the reference in “Little Empty Boat” to “That grave you’ve dug between your legs” (291).

I am his sceptre and shaft (129)

Both these songs root their carnal materiality in the sacred through their use of Biblical texts. Where “Brompton Oratory” cites Luke 24, “Hard on for Love” is a parodic rewriting of Psalm 23. Despite this Biblical parody, however, this focus on the bodily actually places Cave closer to orthodox teaching than to Gnosticism. Elaine Pagels notes that one of the key dividing lines was that where Gnosticism thought of Jesus primarily as a spiritual being, orthodoxy

insisted that he, like the rest of humanity, was born, lived in a family, became hungry and tired, ate and drank wine, suffered and died. They even went so far as to insist that he rose *bodily* from the dead. Here again, as we have seen, orthodox tradition implicitly affirms bodily experience as the central fact of human life. What one does physically – one eats and drinks, engages in sexual life or avoids it, saves one’s life or gives it up – all are vital elements in one’s *religious* development.¹⁶

Cave too emphasises Jesus’s humanity as key to his divinity.¹⁷ This is not, however, to say that his focus on the bodily is straightforwardly orthodox. Rather, he goes much further in making the human body, rather than merely instrumental to “religious development,” itself a locus of divinity.

As seen in the previous chapter, this conferral of divine status upon the beloved runs the risk of idolatry. Even if love itself is taken to be sacred, this kind of deification, in elevating the human to the level of the divine, also (or only) reduces the divine to the level of the human. This is certainly a point where Cave’s work theologically runs foul of Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, published under his own name and thus lacking the distancing effects of pseudonymity to be found in other of his published works, emphasises that,

¹⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (London: Penguin, 1979), 113-114. Italics in original.

¹⁷ See Chapter 2.

for the Christian, preferential love for the beloved or for a friend must be rooted in Christian *agape*:

The more decisively and exclusively preferential love embraces one single person, the further it is from loving the neighbour. [...] [L]ove the beloved faithfully and tenderly, but let love for the neighbour be the sanctifying element in your union's covenant with God. Love your friend honestly and devotedly, but let love for the neighbour be what you learn from each other in your friendship's confidential relationship with God!¹⁸

Of course, Cave is by no means alone in emphasising this kind of decisive, exclusive preferential love. Throughout this section of *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes derisively of "the poet," whose celebration of preferential love on its own terms Kierkegaard dismisses as the project of pre-Christian paganism. Yet Cave goes further than most romantic poets or songwriters in his conferral of divine status on the beloved. This form of idolatry is, according to C. Stephen Evans, ultimately solipsistic:

[W]hen I love my wife as my neighbour, then I cannot make her an idol. [...] Our relation must not become an excuse for ignoring our responsibilities to other. In our love we must not turn solely inward, but in turning towards each other also, in mutual love, we must understand our responsibilities to those others.¹⁹

Cave's work is reflexive enough to incorporate this line of criticism - the isolated, self-destructive narrators of the previous two chapters, left bereft by the departure of love, are proof of this. The idolatry is not an accidental emanation, but a central feature of the work.

¹⁸ Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1995), 62.

¹⁹ C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2006), 275.

Moreover, the fact that Cave incorporates Biblical citation into his work need not be taken as making him a straightforwardly Christian writer in any kind of theological sense. Indeed, according to Kierkegaard, quite the contrary is true:

[L]et a poet who is conscious of being a poet go through what the New Testament teaches about erotic love, and he will be brought to despair because he will not find a single word that could inspire him – and if any so-called poet nevertheless did happen to find a word that he used, it would be a mendacious use, an offense, because instead of respecting Christianity he steals a precious word and distorts it in his use of it.²⁰

Cave's mendacity, in these terms, is clear and consistent. It has already been seen how he uses direct reference to the story of Christ's resurrection (even citing the relevant chapter from Luke's Gospel) to emphasise the divine-carnal connection of "Brompton Oratory," and the dark sexual blasphemy of Psalm 23's appropriation in "Hard on for Love." In other songs from the same time period, he turns New Testament quotations to uses pointedly divorced from their original contexts and meanings. In "Where Do We Go Now But Nowhere?" the most famous idiom of forbearance in English (from Matthew 5:39) is turned to vaguely masochistic and vengeful purposes:

The kitten that padded and purred on my lap
 Now swipes at my face with the paw of a bear
 I turn the other cheek and you lay into that (281)

While in "Little Empty Boat," an outtake from the *The Boatman's Call* sessions, Cave quotes Christ twice. The first is a claim to Christlike status, which is immediately undercut humorously:

I am the resurrection, babe

²⁰ Kierkegaard, 45-46.

And you're standing on my foot (290)

The second sees the narrator more modestly liken himself implicitly to Caesar:

Give to God what belongs to God

And give the rest to me (291)

Something these two Biblical parodies share is that they constitute, within the song, part of an erotic flirtation. The woman in the song is being seduced using Christ's words, which is likely a more "mendacious" purpose to which to put those words than Kierkegaard could have imagined. Once again, the orthodox objection is pre-emptively folded into the material itself, doubling up on the blasphemy.

Cave's heresy, then, is not merely distinct from an orthodox perspective, but actively opposed to one; antinomian in its blasphemy. There is a forcefulness to this kind of content which is echoed by the kinds of comments Cave has regularly made, notably in 'The Flesh Made Word':

Clearly what Jesus most despised, what he really railed against time and time again, were the forces that represented the established order of things, symbolised by the scribes and Pharisees, those dull, small-minded scholars of religious law who dogged his every move [...] What was Christ's great bugbear, and what has sat like dung in the doorway of the Christian church ever since, was the Pharisees' preoccupation with the law in preference to the logos. [...] [H]ow can one be elevated spiritually if they are loaded up with the chains of religious jurisprudence?²¹

In comments such as this,²² Cave stakes out his ground unambiguously: he is on the side of Christ against contemporary equivalents of the Pharisees (for which

²¹ Nick Cave, "The Flesh Made Word," *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997), 140.

²² See Chapter 2 for further examples.

we must read just about every organised Christian church), devotees of law and moralism. The alternative sketched out overtly by Cave here is vague; Christ is on the side of the imagination, of art and creativity – a useful doctrine for the artist, less so for anyone else.²³ Yet here, once again, Cave’s work provides far more fruitful possibilities, as the divine is displaced into not only the human, but the ordinary.

The Triumph of the Mundane

To return to “Get Ready for Love,” it must be noted that God is not located only in the body of the beloved in that song:

Well most of all nothing much ever really happens
 And God rides high up in the ordinary sky
 Until we find ourselves at our most distracted
 And the miracle that was promised creeps quietly by (383)

There is a remarkable theological richness to these lines. “The miracle that was promised,” for instance, is suggestive of both prophecy and revelation, placing both in the realm of the mundane.²⁴ Yet it is the placement of God in the “ordinary sky” that stands out. Given that the verses of the song concern a search for God (with an implication of failure – “we search high and low without mercy or malice/While the gate to the Kingdom swings shut and closes” (383)), it can reasonably be assumed that the divine presence in “the ordinary sky” is being ignored, to which the unnoticed miracle adds credence.²⁵

²³ Sutcliffe, in the same interview cited earlier, pushes back against Cave’s suggestion that work is inherently ennobling, pointing out that a factory worker may disagree. Cave’s response suggests that the work must be voluntary and enjoyable, which seems to exclude a sizeable proportion of humanity (159).

²⁴ See Chapter 2 for more on the democratic potential of prophecy for Cave.

²⁵ Given the presence of the beloved later in the song, this miracle may be the finding of love, which would certainly be commensurate with the identification of earthly love and the divine examined above.

The suggestion, then, is that God is not (or not only) “in the house,” but everywhere else – the divine is ever-present in the mundane.

This would seem to account for a prevalent turn in Cave’s later work, wherein the quotidian comes to be far more prominent than the extraordinary. Two songs from 2016’s *Skeleton Tree*, “Magneto” and “I Need You,” contain references to queueing in supermarkets (an image used twice in the latter). The skeleton tree of the title track, which initially appeared to be an image of desolation, reveals itself to be a television aerial. There is nothing here of the grandiose scale of early Bad Seeds songs like “Well of Misery” or “Tupelo,” songs which were set outside of time. Here we have not only a quotidian reality, but a contemporary one. “Girl in Amber” even fixes itself, somewhat, temporally with its reference to “the song/It’s been since nineteen eighty-four.”²⁶

This emphasis on the contemporary is something that begins to creep into Cave’s work around the early 2000s. Hints towards it can be found in earlier songs, particularly ones which gesture towards autobiography; the response to Cave’s death in “Lay Me Low” (1994) seems to be conducted largely by the music press, who get salacious details from his brother, who “see my work in a different light” and who print “informative six-page features” (230-231). This is picked up on in “O My Lord” (2001), which dramatizes the critical response to Cave’s (at the time) recent work:²⁷

They claimed that I had lost the plot
Kept saying that I was not
The man I used to be

²⁶ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

²⁷ Though *The Boatman’s Call*, the previous album, received widespread praise and acclaim, where its successors, *No More Shall We Part* (2001) and *Nocturama* (2003) got a more lukewarm reception. Given that “O My Lord” comes from the first of these, it seems to function by some foresight.

They held their babes aloft
 Threw marshmallows at the security
 And said that I'd grown soft (326)

The fact that this refers specifically to the press is confirmed by the later reference to the "telescopic camera" within "the hollows of glamour" (327). While these songs do at least constitute a step down from the targeted abuse to specific journalists²⁸ found in the vitriolic "Scum" (1986), it is disappointing that Cave's first forays into the contemporary so heavily involve demonising journalists.

Fortunately, this state of affairs does not last. Only a few tracks after "O My Lord," "Gates to the Garden" stages Cave's turn towards the contemporary and the everyday. For the first two verses of the song, the narrator sits in a churchyard thinking about the dead around him:

Fugitive fathers, sickly infants, decent mothers
 Run-a-ways and suicidal lovers
 Assorted boxes of ordinary bones
 Of aborted plans and sudden shattered hopes (334)

The narrator may be constructing overwrought stories of high drama for these deceased individuals, but they are simultaneously framed as "ordinary." "Decent mothers" in particular stands out as a description of the kind of unshowy character who would previously have been nowhere to be found in a Nick Cave song. But this dwelling on the dead does not last long:

The bell from St. Edmunds informs me of the hour
 I turn to find you waiting there for me
 In sunlight and I see the way that you breathe

²⁸ Not named within the song, but, as contemporary interviews make clear, easily identified by anyone familiar with press coverage of Cave.

Alive and leaning on the gates of the garden

Leave these ancient places to the angels

Let the saints attend to the keeping of their cathedrals

And leave the dead beneath the ground so cold

For God is in this hand that I hold (334)

Antiquity, though explicitly linked with the heavenly, is explicitly rejected in favour of the contemporary. The living beloved is a conduit for the divine, while cathedrals belong to the saints, protagonists of the kind of grand historical narratives the narrator was previously constructing.

In 2004's "Abattoir Blues" the transition is far less smooth, as what seemed to be an abstract, timeless vista of destruction is interrupted by a sudden contemporary element:

Everything's dissolving, babe, according to plan

The sky's on fire, the dead are heaped across the land

I went to bed last night and my moral code got jammed

I woke up this morning with a Frappucino in my hand (397)

At first, we seem to be in a particularly traditional apocalypse, by Cavean standards; the imposition of divine order ("according to plan"). But the word "Frappucino" suddenly brings things up to date, giving the song a specificity that makes the setting of the song recognisable. Asked about this line in 2005, Cave said:

There is some sport in putting in a very contemporary thing. There's a rather pleasing jarring effect to have some of these elements suddenly

come into a song that feels pastoral or timeless and adds a kind of ugly jerk into the times that we actually live in.²⁹

Certainly this kind of “jerk” is an effective aesthetic strategy. But Cave is doing something else here. In the juxtaposition of a contemporary image with an eschatological revelation, he is adding a new element, an increasingly prominent one in his work, to what had been the underpinning theological concept of that work: apocalypse. In so doing, he starts to alter the nature of what apocalypse is in his later work.

The Denial of Apocalypse

By the time “We Call Upon the Author” arrives in 2008, the nature of the eschatology on offer has altered entirely:

o rampant discrimination/ mass poverty/ third world debt/infectious disease/ global inequality and deepening socio-economic divisions ---
(it does in your brain!!!)

WE CALL UPON THE AUTHOR TO EXPLAIN!!!!!!! (466)

What stands out about this litany of disasters is that they are, with the at least partial exception of “infectious disease,” entirely the making of humanity, the result of economic and political systems rather than direct divine intervention. Yet the narrator still seeks divine intervention in the form of elucidating revelation. This implies that these systems themselves take on a kind of divine aspect, that divine authority is ascribed to them at least in this form of being capable of bringing history to an end. The other crucial characteristic shared by the disasters listed here is that they are not sudden catastrophes, but ongoing

²⁹ Debbie Kruger, “Nick Cave: The Songwriter Speaks,” *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 136.

situations which may ultimately reach a crisis point. This crisis point is implied in the next verse, in which the narrator's friend

brings me a book on holocaust poetry
 -----complete with pictures-----
 then tells me to get ready for the rain (466)

The ominous warning for the future here is accompanied by a reminder of a past manmade catastrophe, giving a sense that the present is an island of calm between apocalyptic endpoints. It is not clear whether it is the anxiety of the aforementioned unfolding potential catastrophes that "does in your brain," or their inherent injustice, but either way, they remain the omnipresent background noise of contemporary culture, constantly bubbling ominously in the background.

One way in which Cave's later work signals this kind of shift in its eschatological focus is by explicitly rejecting the imagery of earlier works. "Straight to You" has already been examined as a song of solipsistic apocalypse in which destruction is willed into being by a lone narrator. Later songs, however, while no less emotionally intense, eschew this kind of grandstanding. "Straight to You" uses heavenly bodies to reflect its emotional turmoil:

Gone are the days of rainbows
 Gone are the days of swinging from the stars
 For the sea will swallow up the mountains
 And the sky will throw thunder-bolts and sparks (194)

But "(Are You) the One that I've Been Waiting For?," five years later, critiques this kind of tone as mendacious in its bombast:

O we will know, won't we?
 The stars will explode in the sky
 O but they don't, do they?

Stars have their moment and then they die (280)

Where the quoted lines from “Straight to You” reference the story of the flood and God’s contract with Noah, as expressed in the rainbow (Genesis 6:1-10:17), the following lines from “(Are You) the One...” refer to Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount (specifically Matthew 7:7): “There’s a man who spoke wonders though I’ve never met him/He said, ‘He who seeks finds and who knocks will be let in’” (280). While the oft-cited division of Cave’s work into “Old Testament” and “New Testament” phases (with the division occurring around *The Boatman’s Call*) is overly simplistic in general, here can be seen a movement in emphasis from authoritarian God (or Demiurge) to humane God-made-flesh,³⁰ and from an emotional turmoil that wishes destruction on the world around it to a more hopeful moment. Here the natural temporal order is not interrupted; the stars ultimately burn out naturally. Likewise, where in “Straight to You” “the candle gutters on the ledge” (194), in “Skeleton Tree” some 24 years later, the image returns, but here it is simply “in the window a candle/Well maybe you can see.”³¹ Perhaps this is the same candle, in the same position, still (“maybe”) visible. Either way, however, the repetition of the image once again suggests an emphasis on continuity over decline or destruction.

In a 2008 interview, Cave suggested that his interest from the late 90s on shifted to “the apocalypse that’s happening incrementally.”³² This kind of thinking recalls medieval and earlier millenarian movements, with their belief in the apocalypse as a process rather than a decisive moment, as in the more contemporary view.³³ Yet this kind of thinking runs the risk of the process

³⁰ Which is not to say that the New Testament is an “improvement” on the Old, nor that authoritarianism is not readily to be found in the New, nor humanity in the Old.

³¹ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Skeleton Tree*, Bad Seed Ltd., 2016.

³² Phil Sutcliffe, “Nick Cave: Raw and Uncut 2,” *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 229.

³³ See Chapter 2.

being stretched thin. Frank Kermode writes that the modern rapid increase³⁴ in both technological and social progress leads writers to assume that this rate of change

implies revolution or schism, and that this is a perpetual requirement; that the stage of transition, like the whole of time in an earlier revolution, has become *endless*.

This is the modern apotheosis of Joachism: the belief that one's own age is transitional between two major periods turns into a belief that the transition itself becomes an age, a *saeculum*. We strip the original three-and-a-half years of the Beast, which was the original Johannine period glossed by Joachim, of all its 'primitive' number associations, and are left with eternal transition, eternal crisis.³⁵

While Kermode's assumption that technological and social progress in themselves engender utopianism is questionable, his wider point is deeply applicable to Cave. Cave's later works do indeed place themselves in a realm of endless transition and crisis.

The prime example of this is "Higgs Boson Blues," which brings together the elements of apocalyptic deferral and emphasis on the mundane seen so far. The song is an "otherworldly journey," in John J. Collins's typology: a journey conducted "through heaven, hell or remote regions beyond the normally accessible world."³⁶ The title's invocation of the so-called "God particle," provides a particular spin on this. The narrator's journey to Geneva, where CERN and the Large Hadron Collider are based, is not only a vision quest, but a

³⁴ Given that the lecture from which this is taken was given in 1965, it is a fair assumption that the rate of technological progress in the intervening decades has only led to an increase in this kind of writing; certainly apocalyptic science fiction is an ever-growing genre, even if the rate of social mobility has proven in many ways to be less of a straight line.

³⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 101.

³⁶ John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia 14: Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, ed. John J. Collins (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1979), 6.

journey in *search* of revelation, for proof or disproof of God's existence. This journey is conducted, in part, chronologically rather than spatially. The narrator encounters Robert Johnson, Martin Luther King and colonial missionaries, but continually returns to "driving my car down to Geneva" (513, 515). The journey is conducted entirely under his own power, in a manmade vehicle; there is no suggestion of heavenly visitors. There is revelation, in the form of visions, but no sense from where those visions are emanating. The Higgs-Boson particle's existence was proven in 2012, the year before the song's release, and so, unusually for Cave, the song is responding directly to contemporary events. Moreover, the destination is never reached; the song ends:

Miley Cyrus floats in a swimming pool in Taluca Lake
And you're the best girl I ever had

Can't remember anything at all (515)

Rather than resolving the journey, the song closes with an image of erotic desire³⁷ and a lament for an unremembered past. This is an apocalypse, in the strictest generic sense, in a mundane setting, which, rather than act as a distinct ending, does not even resolve itself.

This is in line with an increasing absence of narrative from Cave's work, particularly after 2008's *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!!!* Neither of the two Grinderman albums, which came out in 2007 and 2010 respectively, contain anything that could be construed as a narrative song, perhaps partly due to the fact that Cave improvised the lyrics for both albums in the studio, which it might be assumed made a coherent narrative of the kind Cave once specialised in harder to achieve. *Push the Sky Away* (2013), however, for which the lyrics were written ahead of time, has a similar conspicuous lack of narrative. Two songs, "Jubilee

³⁷ And possibly violence, given that the image of Miley Cyrus recalls the end of *The Great Gatsby* – in which case, given that violence and desire are found in close proximity, some aspects of Cave's work remain very much constant.

Street” and “Higgs Boson Blues,” contain named characters (historical personages in the latter case), but neither have demarcated settings or any kind of series of events. Both, particularly, lack any kind of resolution; they are narrated entirely in the present tense, with little or no sense of having come from or going anywhere. They are no more than dreamlike fragments. In an interview after the release of *Skeleton Tree* (which lacks anything with even the vague appearance of narrative of these two songs), asked about this lack of narrative, Cave said:

The idea that we live life in a straight line, like a story, seems to me to be increasingly absurd and, more than anything, a kind of intellectual convenience.[...] I feel that the events in our lives are like a series of bells being struck and the vibrations spread outwards, affecting everything, our present, and our futures, of course, but our past as well.³⁸

What is striking here is not only Cave’s disavowal of teleological cause-and-effect narrative structure, but the fact that he justifies this disavowal specifically in mimetic terms. The idea that the form of his work is in itself an attempt to mimic life as it is lived bespeaks a newfound focus on everyday life.

All of this denial and contortion of apocalypse has one particularly significant effect. Apocalypse, both in terms of revelation and of catastrophe, is a force of certainty. It fixes things in place: history is given a shape by an ending, just as Job’s questionings are answered by the appearance of God before him. So undermining apocalypse in the way in which Cave has come to do inevitably undermines this sense of certainty as well. The lack of resolution, then, bespeaks a lack of certainty. Cave’s work has increasingly come to reflect a kind of agnosticism, albeit one permeated by a theologically inflected

³⁸ Mark Mordue, “Nick Cave: ‘I have turned a corner and wandered on to a vast landscape,’” *The Guardian* 4 May 2017. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

sensibility. In answering a question on his own personal belief in 2018, Cave wrote

I am a believer in the inquiry itself, more so than the result of that inquiry. [...] Perhaps this is something of a curse, but the idea of uncertainty, of *not knowing*, is the creative engine that that drives everything I do.³⁹

This emphasis on uncertainty has become increasingly apparent in his later work's agnostic tendencies. It is a kind of prime heresy, in that it emphasises the individual's spiritual journey over and above objective cosmic truth. It is antinomianism taken to an extreme. It also represents the very antithesis of Gnosticism. As Pagels points out, to be "gnostic" (knowing) is to place oneself in opposition to those who claim to know nothing about ultimate reality, who are *agnostic*.⁴⁰ Here again Cave's heresy proves to be an individual one; for all his correspondences with the Gnostic tradition, his personal theology proves not to adhere to its central meaning.

The Tradition of Heresy

The nature of Cave's heresy has by now been sketched out – individualistic, antinomian, agnostic. Yet these labels are of little use in themselves. E.P. Thompson, writing about Blake, has cautioned against using antinomianism as a final resting place for enquiry, since antinomianism "is not a place at all, but a way of breaking out from received wisdom and moralism, and entering upon new possibilities."⁴¹ The particular brand of heresy we see emerging in Cave's work, then, which increasingly seems to shirk certainty and to promote the human and the ordinary as sites of divinity in themselves, must be a site of

³⁹ Nick Cave, "Issue 11," *The Red Hand Files*. December 2018. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

⁴⁰ Pagels, 18.

⁴¹ E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 20.

possibility. The most obvious possibility here is the manner in which it undermines the authority of those organised churches which Cave abjures, promoting the individual as being in themselves the site of their own encounter with the divine. Yet Boer has doubts about the true radical potential of this.

Boer's overriding issue is that he sees Cave's heresy⁴² as emerging out of "a particular Enlightenment ideology of the sacrosanct and inviolable individual," which Boer identifies particularly with the music industry's emphasis on discourses of authenticity.⁴³ This point in itself is difficult to deny, especially given Cave's careful construction of a seemingly sincere persona, as seen in Chapter 4, and his filtering of experience, in his songs, through the divine lyric "I," as examined in Chapter 5. Yet Boer goes on:

[T]his heresy fits in perfectly well with all the other heresies that one may find. Nick Cave has 'chosen' and constructed the heresy that means most to him.⁴⁴

Boer sees Cave's heresy as insufficiently iconoclastic not only because it exists within a dominant artistic and social ideology (the liberal capitalist cult of the individual), but because it fits within a comfortable tradition of resistance. What Boer misses, however, is that there is a whole spectrum between "the chains of religious jurisprudence"⁴⁵ and complete anarchy, and that tradition need not be inherently conservative.

At this point we return to John Schad and his concept of a counter-tradition of "Christian unreason," last seen in Chapter 2. If there is an intellectual context to Cave's heresy, it must be this; the partial list of "heretical

⁴² Boer's conception of Cave's heresy is inherently Christological (as examined in Chapter 5), where I see it as shaped more by an increasing engagement with the mundane world. Given that the latter is still filtered through subjective individual experience, however, this divergence does not impact the following discussion very much.

⁴³ Boer, 83.

⁴⁴ Boer, 84.

⁴⁵ "The Flesh Made Word," 140.

evangelists" offered by Schad in his introduction⁴⁶ includes Emily Dickinson, cited by Cave as one of his favourite poets⁴⁷, and Kierkegaard, whose theological relationship to Cave has already emerged at several points, while the relevance of another of Cave's cited favourites, Blake,⁴⁸ has already been amply demonstrated. Schad says of these irrational Christians, the "losers" in a history written by materialistic secular modernity:

Those losers, the unreasonable Christians, have *no* official history, no history of their own; indeed, theirs is a 'tradition' that refuses tradition, that takes many forms, and that emerges when and where it is least expected.⁴⁹

Here, then, is the theological tradition within which Cave is operating; a fluid, loose association of diverse writers across time, united by an approach to faith that undermines and resists strategies of control. In eschewing reason, these writers cannot be entirely contained by ideology.

This, then, is the true radical potential that Cave's heresy opens up. Boer is entirely correct that his work operates within, and is even structured by, a dominant ideology. But it cannot be covered by this ideology wholly. In the same way that Boer's analysis of Cave's work finds "chink[s] in his authorial armour,"⁵⁰ places where Cave's own strategies of interpretation break down, so the ideology of the authentic individual finds itself under attack at unexpected times in Cave's oeuvre. In the course of this chapter it has been seen that Cave's work steadily evolves, writhing its way free from what had seemed straightforward methods of interpretation – it cannot, for instance, be said to be wholly "Kierkegaardian" or even Gnostic. Similarly, in the course of the last

⁴⁶ John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 4-5.

⁴⁷ Nick Cave, "Issue 25," *The Red Hand Files*. February 2019. Web. 4 Sept 2019.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Schad, 5.

⁵⁰ Boer, 15.

two chapters, it has been seen that the individual/community dialectic runs through much of Cave's work; often, when the former seems to be most dominant, it is proven to have been reliant all along on the latter. The uncertainty which Cave claims to be his creative engine turns out to be a great creative and theological strength as well. His work, especially his later work, in its openness to possibility, itself opens up a space for enquiry.

Conclusion

In 2008, in response to a question about belief in a "higher force," Cave responded "I do believe, but my belief system is so riddled with doubt that it's barely a belief system at all – I see that as a strength rather than a failing."⁵¹ This doubt, and the openness it suggests, has been a constant feature of his career, as expressed in his most famous opening line, to "Into My Arms:" "I don't believe in an interventionist God" – the opening to a verse which then goes on to outline what the narrator would ask of such a God (273). This paradox, the fault line between doubt and faith, is where Cave's work has increasingly found itself.

For all that he has talked up his theology in interviews and pieces like "The Flesh Made Word," the strongest and most affecting portrayal of it comes in 2001's "Darker with the Day:"

Inside I sat, seeking the presence of a God
I searched through the pictures in a leather-bound book
I found a woolly lamb dosing in an issue of blood
And a gilled Jesus shivering on a fisherman's hook (336)

The narrator does not explicitly tell the listener whether or not this constituted proof of God's presence, but the mere fact that it is related seem to suggest so.

⁵¹ Simon Hattenstone, "Old Nick," *Nick Cave: Sinner Saint*, ed. Mat Snow (London: Plexus, 2011), 191.

This is a theological proof found not in doctrine, nor even in prayer, but in artistic experience, not in the words of the Bible (in this instance at least), but in pictorial representations. Representations, moreover, not of radiance and glory, but of pain and suffering. If there is a beauty here, it is that of the sublime. Here, then, is the nub of Cave's theology; God is not interventionist, nor necessarily relational, but experiential, existing for each individual in and through these kinds of artistic encounters. The divine is, in this way, ontologically constituted through revelation.

Conclusion: Does it Matter?

At the beginning of this thesis, I quoted three questions from Lyn McCredden: in paraphrase, is there a system to Cave's religious thought, does this matter for the purposes of criticising his work, and can we find recurring concerns in Cave's work? To take the third question first, each of this thesis's chapters has been dedicated to at least one recurring concern of Cave's work which touches on his theological positions: tradition, eschatology, depravity and the state of the material, individualism, the deified self, and heresy. In examining these, a kind of system has emerged. A protean, questioning, heterodox system, but one which is organised around certain principles: that God may be accessed via creativity, or love; that the individual is the seat of divinity, but that without the mediating force of community this cannot be sustained. What remains to be answered is the second question: how does establishing all of this aid our understanding of Cave?

It has already been established that Cave has a relationship, albeit a tenuous one, to radical thinking in the theological sphere, if not necessarily the political. Boer's work (both in his book on Cave and his *Criticism of series*), to take only the most ready example, has demonstrated how theological positions may be wedded to political ones, specifically Marxist criticism. Indeed, in his conclusion to the former work, Boer tentatively identifies within Cave's work "a challenge, despite Cave's avoidance of politics, a possibility of overthrowing oppressive powers."¹ Moreover, my engagement with Adorno and Benjamin at numerous points in this thesis in itself stands as proof that Cave's theology is far from resistant to Marxist critique (see particularly the common ground found between Cave's and Benjamin's millennialism in Chapter 2, albeit with

¹ Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 117.

caveats). The road towards positioning Cave's work as a call to mount the revolutionary barricades would be a long and difficult one, and I have deliberately shied away from it here, but given that in examining his theology even *as* theology the word "radical" has arisen more than once, the connection is very much there.

Relatedly, in adapting John Schad's concept of a counter-tradition of Christian unreason, an intellectual genealogy for Cave begins to emerge. This genealogy, as seen in Chapter Three, could be said to begin with Gnostic teachers in the early centuries CE, moving forward through mystics and alchemists to the Jungian conception of the psyche and of culture. When combined with Cave's relationship to tradition examined in Chapter One, characterised by adaptation rather than refusal, this opens up any number of questions regarding Cave's place in this genealogy: what he borrows, what he eschews, and what he invents. Similarly, specific literary forebears have emerged. The most obvious of these is Blake, and indeed numerous critics have noted correspondences between Blake's work and Cave's in the past. The specific counter-tradition invoked by Schad, however, opens up many other possibilities. A detailed investigation into Blake's influence upon Cave would certainly be fruitful, but so might one on Joyce, or Wilde, or Yeats, or Dickinson.² By examining these correspondences within Cave's theology, other likenesses in artistic approach may well begin to emerge.

These are only two of the most obvious further routes suggested by my research here. Other individual points demand further exploration, some of which I have signposted along the way: Cave's relationship with Gnosticism, for instance, or his use of narrative forms in his lyrics (and how this develops and alters over the course of his career). Beyond this, however, what I set out to

² The former two have chapters dedicated to them in Schad's *Queer Fish*. The latter two are also mentioned by Schad as being part of this tradition (4-5), as well as being cited by Cave as among his favourite poets (see Chapter 5, note 51).

do in this thesis was to demonstrate that the concept of revelation is at the centre of Cave's theology. It is there in David Brown's concept of tradition as "the motor that sustains revelation,"³ and thus in Cave's engagement with religious and artistic tradition(s). It is in the eschatology that haunts so much of his work. It is in the Gnostic divine spark that clings on within the depraved world of *The Proposition, And the Ass Saw the Angel* and any number of songs. It is in Cave's philosophy of creative endeavour as a link to God, especially as set out in "The Flesh Made Word." It is there in the Kierkegaardian individual, "alone before the face of God."⁴ It is there in Cave's notion of the deified individual, the self or the lover, as the locus of divinity. So central is it that the agnostic turn in Cave's more recent work must go hand in hand with a denial of apocalypse.

The significance of all of this, then, is that it elucidates Cave's theology as a framework for understanding his work. Heterodox and heretical it may be, but what this thesis has shown is that it has a strong central pillar supporting all of its various elements. At the heart of Cave's theology is a prevailing concept of revealed truth. Like Blake, his antinomianism is in essence an appeal to authority over the heads of organised churches, a return to the divine source. As seen in the previous chapter, confronted with the evils of society

rampant discrimination/ mass poverty/ third world debt/infectious
disease/ global inequality and deepening socio-economic divisions

Cave's response is not to seek solace or comfort, but to "CALL UPON THE AUTHOR TO EXPLAIN!!!!!!!!!" (466). This is simultaneously such an appeal to authority, and a demand for revelation. It is not doctrinaire, but experiential, and based on a direct confrontation with the divine. In this single moment, then, we find Cave's systematic apocalyptic theology in microcosm.

³ David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 1.

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1954), 142.

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