

Love, Pain, and Redemption in the Music of Nick Cave

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Introduction

On 25 September 1999 Nick Cave gave a lecture called 'The Love Song' at the *Atelierhaus der Akademie der Bildenden Künste* in Vienna.¹ In that lecture Cave argued that the love song is an inherently sad one, full of pain and loss, but that it also includes God in the picture, for the love song is nothing less than a prayer. I use this lecture as the starting point for my discussion of the love song in the music of Nick Cave, although I do so with a particular twist, namely, the question of redemption. These love songs may be overflowing with pain and God, so much so that I would call them 'brutally divine', but I wish to know whether they offer any redemption. Will love save us? Is it a case of no pain, no gain? Or may redemption be found in an entirely other place in the love songs? In what follows I seek to answer these questions in four stages. I begin with a brief discussion of Cave's lecture, focussing on what he does say, what is barely said, and what is neglected; the next two sections deal with two ways in which pain appears in Cave's songs, one where pain is suffered, and the other where pain is inflicted; finally, I look for redemption in a few unlikely places.²

Love and Prayer

The basis of Cave's argument in the lecture is that a proper love song is one of deep, unrequited, and sad longing.³ The sugary love songs, the ones that bands pump out and which saturate our airwaves day after day, are actually Hate Songs, he argues. In order to support his argument, Cave skips around a

¹ The collection of material on Nick Cave, *The Secret Life Of The Love Song & The Flesh Made Word: Two Lectures By Nick Cave* (London: Mute Records, 2000) contains both the lecture itself in audio form and another talk, 'The Flesh Made Word', given for the BBC radio on 3 July 1999. The text of this second lecture may be found in Nick Cave, *King Ink II* (London: Black Spring, 1997).

² This essay quite consciously focuses on the written text of Cave's love songs, since I propose to discuss features of music and performance elsewhere.

³ Cave's own favourites are: 'Sad Waters', 'Black Hair', 'I Let Love In', 'Deanna', 'From Her to Eternity', 'Nobody's Baby Now', 'Into My Arms', 'Lime Tree Arbour', 'Lucy', and 'Straight to You'.

number of topics and examples, all of them turning on sadness. So we find the desperate effort to fill the void left by his father's death when the young Nick Cave was a teenager (at the time he was being bailed out of the police lock-up by his mother); the sense that he is completing and living out his father's unfulfilled literary hopes; sadness and the theme of duende (the 'eerie and inexplicable sadness that lives in the heart of certain works of art'); God and Jesus Christ; The Song of Solomon and the Psalms, especially Psalm 137 and Boney M's popularising of it; Kylie Minogue's 'Better the Devil You Know'; erotographomania (it does actually exist and means the uncontrollable urge to write love letters); an analysis of his own song 'Far From Me' from *The Boatman's Call*; and then once again the search for God.⁴ Quite a mix, but all these threads wind back to support the argument that the love song is inherently a sad song.

Not only is the love song characterised by sadness and loss, but it is also a prayer, albeit with an artist's twist. Cave suggests that the love song creates God in its writing and performance, since God lives through the words of communication. Once he has made this point, God appears all over the love song, whether as the sound of our efforts to rise above our earthly states and become God-like, or as the light of God 'blasting through our wounds', or as the way we fill the silence between us and God, or even as a direct service to the God created by the love song.

But to whom is the love-song-as-prayer addressed? To God, obviously, but it is also addressed (for the mainly heterosexual Cave) to a woman. In fact, Cave elides God and woman so that the two are often indistinguishable. As we shall see, this elision has both a conventional dimension to it (it is by no means the first time such a folding into one another of God and woman has happened) and, more intriguingly, a taboo dimension where Cave expands the possibilities of this motif in way that reminds one eerily of John Donne.

In sum, the bulk of Cave's lecture argues that the love song is a sad prayer of longing and loss, addressed simultaneously to God and a woman. However, a crucial statement in the lecture introduces another feature of the love song, one that Cave mentions but on which he does not elaborate: "The Song of Solomon is an extraordinary Love Song but it was the remarkable series of love song/poems known as the Psalms that truly held me... In many ways these songs became the blueprint for many of my more sadistic love songs".⁵ The biblical resonance is obvious – both the Song of Solomon and the Psalms provide the deepest inspiration for Cave – but what stands out is the

⁴ Nick Cave, *The Boatman's Call* (London: Mute Records, 1997).

⁵ Nick Cave, 'The Love Song', *Another Magazine* 7 (2004), p. 398.

acknowledgement that the love song is not merely one of pain suffered, but also pain inflicted. They may voice sadness and longing for a lover who has gone, but they also have a sadistic streak about them.

While this feature of pain inflicted is barely mentioned and not elaborated upon, another item curiously does not rate a mention at all – redemption. I must admit to being puzzled and intrigued by this absence, a puzzlement that set me searching for redemption in Cave’s musical and poetic work. At one level Cave is to be commended for not falling into the trap of arguing that love will save the world. He is not so naïve, especially since so many of those syrupy love songs in popular music make precisely that claim. But Cave also avoids the obvious path of salvific suffering. In his love songs there is plenty of pain, whether suffered or inflicted, but we do not find that such suffering is the path to salvation or redemption. Indeed, despite Cave’s repeated invocations of Jesus in his music of the last ten years, it is not a Jesus who suffers for the world out of love.

Sex, Seduction and Sadness: Pain Suffered

For a moment or two let us take Cave at his word in the lecture: the love song is one of pain suffered, especially in terms of the loss of a lover. In order to see what he does with this theme, I would like to exegete the written text of one song in particular, ‘Brompton Oratory’,⁶ following the twists and turns of the lyrics. However, since I cannot quote the song in full due to copyright reasons, I refer the reader to two freely available online resources and paraphrase the song here.⁷ The songwriter begins by walking up the steps of the oratory, hailing the joyful day’s return. It is Pentecost and the reading comes from Luke 24, especially the verses where Christ returns to his loved ones after the resurrection. But now the song turns and the singer looks at the “stone apostles”, thinking to himself that such a joyful return is alright for some. But for him, he wishes he was made of stone so that he did not have to a “beauty impossible to define”, impossible to believe or to endure. The third stanza moves to the act of communion, in which the blood is “imparted in little sips” with the “smell of you still on my hands”. And as he brings the cup to his lips, he reflects that no God in the skies of devil in the sea could “do the job that

⁶ Cave, *The Boatman’s Call*.

⁷ See ‘Nick Cave: Brompton Oratory Lyrics’, *Metrolyrics.com*, at <http://www.metrolyrics.com/brompton-oratory-lyrics-nick-cave.html>. Accessed 02/02/2010; or ‘Brompton Oratory Lyrics’, *AlltheLyrics.com*, at http://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/nick_cave/brompton_oratory-lyrics-12165.html. Accessed 02/02/2010.

you did” of bringing him to his knees. We close with him sitting on the stone steps, feeling at a loss, forlorn and exhausted “by the absence of you”.

The song opens with the lightest of percussion, a swish on the cymbals and a soft tap on a snare drum. The only other instrument is an organ that plays in an ecclesial fashion. One could be forgiven for thinking that it is an ever-so-slightly upbeat hymn, which might conceivably make its way into the repertoire of a church choir – except that the slightly taboo lyrics may not be as acceptable for your garden variety choir (although I have known choir members to be interested in all manner of kinky activities). However, that taboo element does not show up initially. Instead, a series of tensions emerge as soon as the song opens; tensions I would like to trace in their convoluted paths.

The first four lines invoke hymnody with images of the stone steps, the joyful day’s return, the shadowed vault and the hailing of the Pentecostal morn.⁸ Already there is a hint of the song’s paradox of loss: the “joyful day’s return” runs a contrary path to the painful disappearance of a lover. While the lyrics merely hint at a tension, a far stronger one is first established in a curious disjunction between the style of music and those first words of joy. The music may be hymn-like, but that music is not composed of the hopeful tones of Pentecost; more appropriate to Good Friday, perhaps, or Jesus’ temptation in the desert, or the murder of the innocents. Yet when the words kick in, we hear of climbing up the church stairs to a joyful Pentecostal morn; an immediate jarring sets in. Add to this the way that Cave sings the words – mournfully slowly – and the song begins to strain with the friction of competing directions.

One more tension completes the collection. The first stanza (the first four lines) evokes a collective scene of worship that the singer is about to join. We follow him as he steps upward, entering the church to what we assume to be a Pentecost worship service. Yet as soon as the second stanza begins (“The reading is from Luke 24”), we undergo a shift from the collective to the personal, or, rather, from participation to observation. Suddenly the song swings to the singer’s reporting on what is going on. The feeling of being at the beginning of a hymn has been shattered, for this is very much an individual and personal song.

Now I can return to the tension I mentioned earlier, namely between the sense of return evoked by the Gospel passage and the singer’s own palpable sense of loss. That loss is not stated until the last line: “By the absence of you”. Yet it overshadows the whole song before that final line. For example, the hint of loss already appears with the juxtaposition of the Gospel reading and the

⁸ It is not the only time Cave has entered a church at the beginning of a song – see ‘Darker With the Day’ (Cave 2001).

stone apostles. The lyrics do not specify which verses from Luke 24 are read, but a quick look at the text reveals four episodes (or pericopes as New Testament critics are wont to call them): the women at the empty tomb on the Sunday morning; the appearance of Jesus to the two walking to Emmaus; his appearance among the gathered followers soon afterwards; and then the explanation of what had happened. All of these episodes clearly deal with the theme of return, especially that of Jesus, to those whom Cave calls “his loved ones”. However, this evocation of love jars with the stone apostles to whom he turns his gaze. Stone hearts, I wonder, or perhaps a reflection of the singer’s own heart? Of course it is, for the stone apostles were once the lucky ones, but not the stone-dead heart of the singer. *They* found their lover coming to back to them.

Up until this point the song is interesting but not stunning: Cave goes into a church, hears a Bible reading, looks at some statues and thinks about his own sad state of loss. But then, something new enters the song, with the lines:

A beauty impossible to define

A beauty impossible to believe

A beauty impossible to endure⁹

This is the beauty Cave does not wish to see, a beauty that includes a hint of pain with the final word of the third line. A beauty impossible to endure is not necessarily a pleasurable one, or perhaps it is a pleasure found only through pain. Whose beauty? Is he referring to the apostles seeing the beauty of the risen Christ? Or is it Cave himself who does not wish to look upon that beauty? Or is it the beauty of the lover who has gone? We do not know quite yet, unless of course we have listened to the song countless times (as I have in writing this piece). What begins to happen is a merging of Christ and the loved one. The two begin to overlap, to wash into one another, and the singer’s passionate devotion applies to both.

Or perhaps they are one and the same; a trinity of Cave, Christ, and an unknown lover. But this is really only the beginning, for the abstract admiration and puzzlement over beauty passes over into physical, sensual contact, although not in the way we might expect. Blood is imparted in little sips: here we have the evocation of the cup of wine at the Eucharist, tipped gently by the priest or minister as the communicant kneels. Then Cave takes control and lifts the cup up to his own lips. Between these two acts is a line that shifts the whole register: “The smell of you still on my hands”. Is this the smell of Christ? Or is it the smell of sex, of vaginal fluids, or perhaps of something else? If so, the sex must have been recent. Or is there a hint of something that pushes past the boundary into fetishized sex? The lines now evoke menstrual

⁹ Cave, *The Boatman’s Call*.

fluid, the blood in little sips slides towards pain and loss, and the cup is not necessarily a Eucharistic cup, but melds with the cup of suffering mentioned in Christ's prayer in Gethsemane; "My father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt 26:39). And if we recall the Song of Songs, then the cup of wine itself becomes a metaphor for the vagina and its fluids.

It is never clear whether Cave sings of his lost lover or of Christ, for the Eucharist becomes a moment of sensual and physical contact with both Christ and the lover. Or rather, it is a memory, a physical recovery, or even a transubstantiation of what was lost, for Christ, too, had gone and left his lovers behind. Does Cave hope that the act will bring back his lover? This does not seem to be the case. Instead, we have broached an area of sexual taboo, especially in light of a history in which Christ has been de-sensualized and de-sexualized. It reminds me of the overt sexuality and passionate spirituality of the twelfth-century Beguine, Hadewijch of Brabant, from the Netherlands (this is from her seventh vision):

On that day my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break and all my veins were in travail. The longing in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language.... I desired to have full fruition of my beloved, and to understand and taste him to the full. I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity, and that mine then should hold its stand and be strong enough to enter into perfection until I content him.¹⁰

However, there is another feature of this taboo sensuality that may pass unnoticed: the sex of the lover is never specified. We assume the singer's lost lover is female, largely because of the biographical knowledge that Cave is heterosexual. But English does not specify gender with its second pronoun (the reference to "baby" is no giveaway). And so it is by no means clear whether the one who has gone is female or male. The boundaries between bodies, identities, and genders become quite blurred as they fold over and leak into one another; and that includes Christ.

So it is with the remaining words of the song: the lover who does far more of a 'job' on the singer than either God in heaven or the devil beneath the sea is now both/and the sensual Christ and the lost lover. But as with so many of Cave's songs, that devotion and passion is not a source of joy. Exhausted pain washes over the end of the song, and, as with Cave's best love songs, the pain is most exquisite when both God and pain are present; now in the figure of

¹⁰ Hadewijch, *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 280.

Christ. And yet there is no hint of redemption even when Christ is invoked, even when the love song is a prayer.

Revenge: Pain Inflicted

So far I have remained within the directions Cave provides in his lecture on the love song, namely, that loss and sadness are inescapable elements of such songs. However, it is all too easy to allow Cave to set the agenda; a matter on which I have voiced my suspicions elsewhere.¹¹ So I would like to explore further and seek out what is missing or only half-acknowledged. That search leads me to one or two sentences in the lecture that open out into a whole new area: “Though the Love Song comes in many guises – songs of exultation and praise, *songs of rage and despair*, erotic songs, songs of abandonment and loss – they all address God”.¹² And it is far more explicit when he suggests that the Psalms are “bathed in bloody-minded violence”, that they “became the blueprint for many of my more sadistic love songs”.¹³ Despite these references, there is no sustained discussion in the lecture on the love of a type of song that is quite prevalent in Cave’s work: the one that plans, celebrates, mourns, and reflects on the murder of a lover. When Cave does discuss a particular love song in detail, it is not one of the songs of murder and mayhem. Instead, he prefers to focus on Psalm 137, a song of exile and loss “by the waters of Babylon”, or his own song, ‘Far From Me’ (from *The Boatman’s Call*), where he can indulge in one of his favourite pastimes, autobiography.

So let me consider one of these more violent songs, ‘Nobody’s Baby Now’, from *Let Love In*.¹⁴ What we find here is that pain can take two forms, not only pain suffered in loss, but also the sadistic form of pain inflicted. It may be in anger or revenge, but the pain is inflicted on the (ex-)lover. In other words, love is not merely about one’s own sadness and longing; it is also about violence wreaked upon another.

In ‘Nobody’s Baby Now’ the violence is not immediately obvious. What is obvious is the opening invocation of the faith-love/God-woman nexus: “I’ve searched the holy books / I tried to unravel the mystery of Jesus Christ, the saviour”. To no avail it seems, including the search through the poets and analysts and books on human behaviour. To all appearances, here is a song of

¹¹ Roland Boer, ‘Gates to the Garden: Nick Cave og bBibeltæksternes Efterliv’ (Gates to the Garden: The Afterlives of Nick Cave), *Fønix* vol. 29, no. 3-4 (2005), pp. 31-47; Roland Boer, ‘Under the Influence? The Bible, Culture and Nick Cave’, *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 12 (2006).

¹² Cave, ‘The Love Song’, p. 397, emphasis added.

¹³ Cave, ‘The Love Song’, p. 398.

¹⁴ Nick Cave, *Let Love In* (London: Mute Records, 1994).

loss and grief and a desperate effort to understand what happened to this love affair. He cannot get it out of his life, for “she lives in my blood and skin”. But then a few hints appear, ambiguous lines that may be read in two ways. So we hear the words, “Her winter lips as cold as stone”, as well as, “But there are some things love won’t allow”. Cold lips may well be an attitude, a posture in love, but they may also be those of a cold corpse buried beneath a tomb-stone. And then I want to ask, what precisely is it that love won’t allow? All of which becomes much more sinister with these lines:

This is her dress that I loved best
With the blue quilted violets across the breast
And these are my many letters
Torn to pieces by her long-fingered hand
I was her cruel-hearted man
And though I’ve tried to lay her ghost down
She’s moving through me, even now.¹⁵

Again, the scene may be one of a lonely soul left with a few relics of his departed object of love. But how has she departed? I get a strong impression of an obsessive lover fingering what is left after a crime of passion. The reason it feels that way is the barely repressed violence. The letters are torn to pieces, he was a cruel-hearted man, violets are flowers that grow upon graves, and he desperately wishes to settle her ghost down. The genius of the song is that all this remains understated, hinted at but never quite said.

This song is one of barely repressed anger and violence that mingles with the longing and loss. But it is also a song of misogyny. Much of the violence in Cave’s songs is directed at women; or rather, his love songs are rather conventionally about women and so when they give voice to pain inflicted on someone else, that person is invariably the woman in question. Now, Cave has been questioned about this inherent misogyny from time to time and his answer varies. Sometimes he suggests it is due to a burning anger at a past lover, so he sits down and writes a song about it. At other times he points to his morbid fascination with murders and the details of serial killers. At yet other moments he admits it may be because he went to a private boys’ school, so women have become a mystery and threat.¹⁶ Further, as we saw earlier, he also blames the Bible and its violence. But Cave tends to skip the connection between violence, murders of passion, and serial killers on the one hand, and the sense of sad longing that is essential to the love song on the other.

¹⁵ Cave, *Let Love In*.

¹⁶ See, for example, Claudio Fabretti, ‘Nick Cave: The Bad Seed of Rock’, *Onda Rock* (2005), at http://www.ondarock.it/Cave_eng.html. Accessed 23/12/09; Cave, *Let Love In*.

The easy option here would be to take Cave to task for crass misogyny and dismiss his work on some ethical ground or other. Apart from being profoundly suspicious of ethics, I would suggest that the much more difficult option is to put forward that, just like sadness, loss, and longing, misogyny is actually part of love. But then so is misanthropy, for love is as much a power struggle, a contest between two or more people who attempt to better one another. In love we find surveillance and suspicion, jealousy and anger, breakouts and guilt, curtailment and efforts at change, put downs and mockery; in short, various levels of emotional and intellectual violence. I would suggest that Cave brings out this difficult truth.

Yet even here Cave offers little in the way of redemption. I do not wish to suggest that revenge is a form of redemption, no matter how popular that notion might be. Indeed, Cave studiously avoids the most obvious form of redemption in religious terms, namely, the death and resurrection of Christ. For all Cave's talk of the Bible, the rage of God and soft call of Jesus, the love songs in the Song of Solomon and the Psalms, bringing God to existence through song for where "two or more are gathered in my name, there I am also"; for all this and more, Cave rarely, if ever, refers to the suffering and death of Jesus. The story of the cross is, at least according to conventional representations, a story of divine love and pain, of redemption and violence; God loved the world so much that he gave his only son to die for it. But there are also the less savoury aspects. In the cross appear the sadistic violence of love, child abuse, redemption through pain and the loving detail of an execution-style murder. No pain, no gain, it would seem. Nevertheless, Cave avoids this motif of Christ's inflected suffering as a mode of redemption.

Conclusion

So where is redemption to be found in the love song? One could well argue that redemption is a perpetual motif in all Cave's work, both in musical and literary terms. Yet redemption has appeared neither in the love songs where pain is suffered, nor in those where pain is inflicted. I suggest that redemption begins to appear in a relatively recent number of songs that offer glimpses of redemption in a dialectical fashion. In fact, the form of the songs indicates their dialectical nature, for in his recent work on *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*,¹⁷ *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!*¹⁸ and the album produced by the alternative formation of some members of the Bad Seeds, known as Grinderman, Cave has begun a process of reconciling the raw post-punk rock of his earlier days with

¹⁷ Nick Cave, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus* (London: Mute Records, 2004).

¹⁸ Nick Cave, *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* (London: Mute Records, 2008).

the crooning love-songs of the not-so-distant past.¹⁹ At the level of content this dialectical resolution shows up in the nature of the love songs on these albums, for they, too, offer reconciliation. Let me provide three examples.

To begin with, in ‘Nature Boy’ the song turns on the lines, “in the end it is beauty / That is going to save the world, now”.²⁰ The routine atrocity and murder of the opening lines finds a possible answer in beauty, the trigger of which is the world-changing arrival of a lover. Further, in ‘Messiah Ward’ we are met initially with an overwhelming impression of disaster: the refrain keeps reminding us that “they’re bringing out the dead” and we learn that the stars have been torn down and that the moon has been banned from shining.²¹ Yet in the pitch dark of this mayhem, the author suggests to his lover, “You can move up a little closer / I will throw a blanket over”. It is a small act, but in the midst of the cataclysm it offers a simple hope.

Finally in ‘Abattoir Blues’ the cataclysmic scenario is the most extensive of the lot:²² fire in the sky, mountains of dead, crashing stock exchanges, the culture of death and mass extinction. The song is also suffused with the deep contradictions of everyday life. The frivolous life of those in wealthy nations – sparrows on the way to work and Frappuccinos in the morning – clashes with the scenes of woe that come from elsewhere in the world. How to respond? The song offers no final solution to the abattoir, preferring to throw out possibilities. Is it to be a lifeline from God? What about escaping with the two of them? Or is it through a simple request: “Slide on over here, let me give you a squeeze”?

These songs trace a tension. No longer do we follow a desultory path to a grim end, whether the end of the world or a love affair; instead, another option begins to open up. The sky might be on fire, and the dead might be heaped up, but the lover has not left, and Cave has not penned some violent song of hateful revenge. Not so much a pie-in-the-sky resolution, the songs explore the possibility that the smallest act of love in the midst of pain and suffering may actually make a difference. Or perhaps we may not be able to stop the pain and sadness, but there are one or two things that might lessen them. These shards offer no grand resolution (unlike the earlier attempt in ‘New Morning’ from *Tender Prey* (Cave 1988)),²³ no claim that love will save us, no carefully worked-out schema of redemption – just the occasional hint that things need not go completely to hell.

¹⁹ Grinderman, *Grinderman* (Los Angeles: Anti-; London: Mute Records, 2007).

²⁰ Cave, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*.

²¹ Cave, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*.

²² Cave, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*.

²³ Nick Cave, *Tender Prey* (London: Mute Records, 1988).