

UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA  
FACULDADE DE LETRAS

PROGRAMA EM TEORIA DA LITERATURA

**U** LISBOA

UNIVERSIDADE  
DE LISBOA



FACULDADE DE  
LETRAS

FOR A LARK  
THE POETRY OF SONGS

Telmo Rodrigues

DOUTORAMENTO EM ESTUDOS DE LITERATURA E DE CULTURA  
TEORIA DA LITERATURA

2014

Universidade de Lisboa  
Faculdade de Letras

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Doutoramento em Estudos de Literatura e de Cultura  
Teoria da Literatura

2014



## Acknowledgments

The work for this thesis was done under a fellowship granted by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT): the time granted to think is priceless, and I am indeed thankful for being allowed to benefit from it. During this period I have also benefited from the resources put at my disposal by my host institution, the Nova Institute of Philosophy (IFILNOVA).

Professor António Feijó has been teaching me since my first year of undergraduate studies and Professor Miguel Tamen since I started graduate studies: I am still to this day amazed at the luck I have for being given the opportunity to work with both of them, and my gratitude for their efforts and enthusiasm in crafting this thesis is immeasurable. As a student of the Program in Literary Theory I must extend my thanks to Professor João Figueiredo, who is an integral part of the Program and with whom I have learnt many valuable things about art.

When writing a thesis, a friend who enjoys editing is a blessing one must always be thankful for; in any case, I would gladly dismiss Helena's editing skills for the friendship which has shaped this work beyond recognition and, necessarily, beyond any written acknowledgment.

Shawn Severson read through a final version of this thesis, correcting my English and making insightful comments. Among the people who have helped me along the way it would be unfair not to name Professor Elisabete Sousa, Humberto and Ana, Maria, Filipe, José, Pedro, Sofia (for the faith in Morrissey), and Alberto (for *The Germs* and other questions).

Dora and Júlia are my justifications.

## Abstract

It is commonly accepted that art is humanity's highest achievement and a definite proof of distinction between humans and other animals. In that sense, the higher the artistic accomplishment, the more sublime the human. The premise for my thesis is that a distinction between high and low art is useless, and, as such, other distinctions must be put in place in order to qualify human beings and the environments they inhabit. My overall argument is that it is not the extraordinary but the ordinary that distinguishes human beings not only from other animals but also among themselves. Ordinarity is the central aspect of our lives and a decisive part of who we are. Many different aspects out of our control condition choices we make, and we are usually led to believe that those aspects are what is relevant for assessing our lives; nevertheless, it is what we choose that is decisive. Taking pop music as an instance of low art, how and why we relate to some things and not others will be discussed; by approximating pop music to the practices of poetry, an instance of high art, it will be shown that most intellectual thought put in the creation of one type of art is present in the other: allegiance to one or the other is a matter of personal choice, not of constituency.

## Resumo

É comum aceitar a ideia de que a arte é aquilo que a humanidade tem de mais nobre e a demonstração absoluta de que os humanos são diferentes de outros animais. Desse ponto de vista, quanto mais nobre a arte mais sublime o ser humano. A premissa da minha tese é a de que a distinção entre arte erudita e arte popular é inútil e, assim sendo, devem ser consideradas outras distinções para qualificar seres humanos e os vários espaços que habitam. O meu argumento geral pressupõe que não é o extraordinário mas antes o comum que nos distingue não só de outros animais mas também de outros espécimes humanos. Aquilo que é central nas nossas vidas, e um aspecto crucial para sermos quem somos, é aquilo que fazemos normalmente. Sendo que as nossas escolhas podem ser condicionadas por muitas variáveis, temos por hábito pensar que o que é importante para compreendermos a nossa vida são essas variáveis; no entanto, são as nossas escolhas que importam. Tomando a música pop como um exemplo de arte popular, serão discutidas as formas e razões que nos levam a apreciar algumas coisas em detrimento de outras; ao aproximar a música pop das práticas da poesia (uma arte erudita), pretende-se mostrar que a maior parte das considerações que dão origem a uma são idênticas às que originam a outra: a inclinação para uma ou para a outra depende da escolha pessoal, não de predisposição biológica.

## Keywords

Pop Music – Bob Dylan – Morrissey – Ordinarity – Poetry

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Note: This thesis includes as Annex I a data DVD containing the songs discussed or alluded to in each chapter.

*You can listen to these songs,  
Have a good time and walk away.  
But for me it's not that easy.  
I have to live these songs forever.*

(Daniel Johnston, "Peek A Boo")

## Foreword

The following thesis is a consequence of a lifetime of listening, talking about and dancing to pop music; it is also a consequence of failing, in many moments, to explain why such activities are relevant for my life. The essays comprising this thesis follow arguments about how and why we relate to certain objects and the way in which relating to those objects might be an indicator of our way of thinking and dealing with the environments we live in throughout our lives. As the objects in question are not counted among canonical art, they have been, in many moments, shun as mindless trifles and such snubbing parallels casting aside my own life as worthless; as this conversation is about music, it could also be about anything else another human being thinks of as relevant for his own life. In this manner, this thesis is a reaction against a particular kind of position in which people assume the achievements of canonical art as the most sublime instances of humanity; such a position tends to treat people who do not relate to those canonical pieces of sublimity as petty human beings. Against this position, I contend that there is no special way human beings relate to art and that taking an object as an instance of art is a matter of pointing out particular aspects in certain works rather than identifying a list of pre-determined features; in my view, an ethical account of art is a conversation about human beings (the mere fact we converse about such themes being a crucial distinction from other animals). With this I do not claim that our strong feelings about particular works are decisive in claiming an object as an instance of art; however, I do hold that the way we, as members of the human species, relate to certain objects is more relevant than the virtuosity one can formally attribute to each object. The defense of a relativistic position is, naturally, preposterous, and so I try to build the case for these objects as fine examples of what we usually describe technically as poetry. I generally subscribe to Richard Rorty's claim that there is no truth about life or death that poetry can convey better than prose; yet I also find that Rorty's lament about not having spent more time with poetry is something to take into account. An important aspect of this work, then, is the establishment of a close connection between music and poetry, by denoting that particular performances of songs function in the same manner as poems.

In 1929, reviewing *fado*, the Portuguese national song, Fernando Pessoa wrote: "All poetry—and song is assisted poetry—reflects what the soul does not have. That is

why the song of sad nations is joyful, and the song of joyful nations is sad” (210).<sup>1</sup> One of the ambitions of the following thesis is to attend to the cryptic nature of the expression “assisted poetry.” No doubt the notion of assistance comes from adding music and vocal delivery to a written poem, which might help to supply a meaning to the words by resolving matters related to prosody: in a certain sense, this is close to the idea of performance as a particular interpretation for a set of words. Nonetheless, the nature of Pessoa’s expression seems different in that it acknowledges the nature of dependency between the poem and the performance—performance is not *an* interpretation but assistance to *the* interpretation. My argument is that a song is more than the lifting of a poem from the page and in many cases, but not all, one requires the performance in order to have a poem—an arrangement of words in poem-like shape might not be enough to count a song among the class of instances we refer to as poetry. And this is not just a question regarding the quality of the words, as if being better arranged they could be counted as poetry; it is the case that in certain instances the meaning of the words is only established by the particular performance, and it is that meaning, and how it is produced, which makes it count as a poem. In that sense, contrary to Nelson Goodman’s account in *Languages of Art*, for instance, the correct reproduction of a score does not equal a genuine instance of a musical work; performances of a certain song, whether they follow a score or a particular interpretation, cannot, no matter how technically correct they are, reproduce the original. Some music, in this sense, is more closely related to the case of painting, in which all new instances of an original object should be counted as imitations and forgeries.

A second aspect I would like to note about Pessoa’s review of *fado* is that Pessoa is not making any kind of distinction between music and poetry, assuming songs are a type of poetry; that being so, songs, as poetry, are a reflection of an absence within the soul. However, in the next line, Pessoa adds: “Fado, however, is neither joyful nor sad. It is an interval episode.” And so, one can assume, *fado* is a type of poetry formed outside the scope poetry usually takes form in. After its inclusion within the realm of poetry, *fado*’s character of exceptionality within that realm is an even greater form of flattery. The following work, which deals with some subjects bearing a character of exceptionality, is of the same nature as the inclusion of *fado* in the realm of poetry: a form of flattery to its subjects. It is also, in a wider sense, an expression of gratitude, similar to the one expressed by Patti Smith when describing her first experience recording her poetry

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

accompanied by music: “These things were in my mind from the first moment I entered the vocal booth. The gratitude I had for rock and roll as it pulled me through a difficult adolescence. The joy I experienced when I danced. The moral power I gleaned in taking responsibility for one’s actions” (249). The gratitude, the joy of dancing and the moral power of taking responsibility for my choices were also in my mind as I moved along with this work.

## First Words

Arnie Cunningham lacked social skills and, as his fragile body and pimpled face made him stand out from the other teenagers in Libertyville, he was an easy target for all sorts of bullies; he was the kind of kid who was even bullied by his parents, both professors at the local university. The only thing helping Arnie along his painful coming of age was his childhood friend, Dennis Guilder: Dennis was popular, good-looking, and had the physical structure of an American high school football hero. Their friendship was based on a shared childhood that allowed both boys to see beyond their looks or social position. Their friendship would have got them through high school's torments were it not for something that happened just before their senior year started: in August 1978 Arnie bought a car and everything changed. The car was a run-down 1958 Plymouth Fury that Arnie bought from an old army veteran, Roland D. LeBay. Arnie worked hard to restore the car, and in a couple of months he could be seen cruising around town in it, always tuned to WDIL, an AM radio station from Pittsburgh that only played old songs from the 1950s. In those last months of 1978, Arnie's life changed: he became more assertive, he stood up to his parents, faced some of his other bullies, and even got a girlfriend, Leigh Cabot. The changes were so profound that they even manifested themselves physically: he seemed older and his face appeared to be cleansed from acne. The change Arnie experienced would lead, eventually, to the breaking of his family ties, his life-long friendship with Dennis, and his budding relationship with Leigh—it would culminate, finally, not only in his death but also in his parents' death. Arnie's story is the story of the tragic coming of age of a teenager; Dennis, narrating the story, speaks of the strange relationship Arnie developed with that car, which Arnie called Christine, and how Christine's original owner might have dealt with occult forces that would now manifest themselves through the car. Dennis was convinced that Arnie's sudden changes were not natural and spoke about LeBay's ghost possessing his friend. One might argue that evil spirits had something to do with Arnie's changes although one would need to believe in such things to accept the explanation; a much more plausible explanation would be that music changed him.

Stephen King's *Christine*, in line with the author's reputation, is a story that deals with the supernatural; nevertheless, in its obsession with music, one might argue for a different case. The novel is composed of three parts, with a total of fifty-one chapters, a

prologue, and an epilogue. The first part is entitled “Dennis: Teenage-Car Songs”; the second part, “Arnie: Teenage Love-Songs”; lastly, the third part, “Christine: Teenage Death-Songs.” On top of this, each chapter (excluding prologue and epilogue) begins with lines from a song, most songs dealing with cars albeit not exclusively. Beyond this formal relation to music, a great deal of the plot depends on music and how the main characters relate to it. (The story is not about characters who put music at the center of their lives but of how music continually marks every moment of those lives, even when they are not aware of it.) On a second level, Christine, the car at the heart of the novel has an existence that depends on the music playing on her radio—in a way, the music brings her to life, and it is through music she communicates.

In the same year the novel was published, John Carpenter directed a film adaptation (*Christine*, 1983). Simplifying the plot, Carpenter’s adaptation has some remarkable changes—first and foremost, it removes the idea of ghosts, which is so prominent in the novel, hinting at it only in the way Arnie (Keith Gordon) repeats a catch phrase used by George LeBay<sup>2</sup> (Roberts Blossom). Carpenter’s adaptation gives Christine the spotlight from the opening sequence, where one sees Christine in the assembly line, already doing harm and even killing a worker; in the novel there is no such description, it is only suggested LeBay might have offered a human sacrifice to the car by allowing his daughter to be killed inside of it. Carpenter’s decision to attribute responsibility to the car by implying it is alive underlines the possibility of a love triangle between Arnie, Leigh, and Christine;<sup>3</sup> several of the novel’s aspects seem clearer with this change, particularly the notion of how the story is dealing with Arnie’s coming of age. It also makes the question of language less a mark of the supernatural and more a part of a natural relationship to music. At a certain point, for instance, Arnie starts using the word “motorvating” to refer to the act of driving around in his car. In the novel there is an explanation as to the origin of the expression, namely a reference to a Chuck Berry song (99). In the film, however, there is no such explanation; the use of the word depends on the fact the song has been heard before as part of the soundtrack. In the novel, the relationship between music and language is a technical device to convey that Arnie is being possessed and, that being so, his strange use of language denotes another character; nonetheless, the argument would still be valid, since LeBay’s ghost also uses

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<sup>2</sup> One of the changes from the novel to the film is the disappearance of Roland LeBay; in the film, Roland is already dead, and it is his brother, George, who sells Arnie the car.

<sup>3</sup> In the novel, it is LeBay’s ghost that has an obsession with Leigh, making it difficult to understand whether Arnie is an autonomous character throughout most of the action.



the word “motorvating,” implying that his language is also semantically dependent on music. The use of the word comes, in both cases, from the repetitive exposition to songs and, since both of Christine’s owners are treated to the same diet of old rock and roll songs (Christine’s radio does not play any other kind of music), it seems safe to assume that music is relevant at least in the way it shapes some people’s language (in Christine’s case, it is her language).

Carpenter’s version has, from the start, an advantage over the novel since Carpenter’s medium allows for the use of sound, giving music its due share in the plot. In the “Author’s Note” to the novel, King explains that the quotes from songs have been attributed to the singers or bands playing them and not to the people who might have written the songs; he argues, against the purists, that a song belongs to the performer: “In the world of popular song, it is as the Rolling Stones say: the singer, not the song.” Thus, King is trying to emphasize a relationship between the way a song is performed and its use in the novel, as if the words were not as relevant as the way the singer or band performs them. Quoting from songs in the novel goes from a simple line to entire stanzas; sometimes it is as repetitive as this quote from Woody Guthrie (203):

Take you for a ride in my car-car,  
Take you for a ride in my car-car,  
Take you for a ride,  
Take you for a ride,  
Take you for a ride in my car-car.<sup>4</sup>

This quote is chosen as a notation for the actual song, and its value is not merely in the meaning of the words (although they must still hold some value); implied in the quotation is the actual performance and consequently it is that performance being referenced. Some people believe discussing songs academically is a way of diminishing them; it is my belief they are diminished by not being talked about. This fear of staining the purity of the song by putting its lyrics onto paper is also at the root of many disclaimers in works similar to this thesis where authors refer to the discussion of a song as an extension of the pleasure afforded by a song, even when those discussions might lead into philosophy or more technical literary criticism; I think this is the wrong approach, and I do not believe the discussion of a song being an extension of the pleasure of listening to the song—it might be another kind of pleasure. In my edition of King’s *Christine*, there is a mistake in the song quoted in chapter 22 (“Roadrunner”): in

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<sup>4</sup> The quote is from a children’s song by Guthrie, mostly known as “Car Song”; the transcription of the lyrics changes the original lines, which ran: “Take you riding in my car-car.”

the place for the author's name, where it should read "Jonathan Richman" it reads "Jonathan Richmond"; the following essays arise from the feeling that the misspelling of the author's name is a symptom of a way of relating to music ("Roadrunner" unfairly became more relevant than its writer, a magnificent songwriter). In this sense, the Rolling Stones might not be completely right, and this thesis addresses symptoms from other types of relationships to music.

In 1969, with a second revised edition in 1971, Nik Cohn published what is known as the first attempt to critically tackle rock and roll and pop music, *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom*. In what is now referred to as a piece of archaeological criticism, poorly researched, marked by factual mistakes and heavily dependent on subjective positions, Cohn's book still holds, nonetheless, some piercing views on the first years of pop music. His most striking is the description of Bob Dylan as the devil who came into the pop music scene and ruined everything forever. This position is held by Cohn's notion that in the 1950s, when rock and roll came about, all was dependent on money making; it was all about selling records and to sell records one needed to reach people: "The point is that pop doesn't work around good records or pretty voices or cute people—those are only details. Really, it happens off superheroes and superdollars, off hyped mass hysteria and deepdown social change, off short-term collective insanities. People aren't relevant" (85). The way in which this argument is counterintuitive lies in its stress on "coolness" and not in musical virtuosity; an argument used, for instance, to explain how the coming of Elvis wrecked Bill Haley's career.<sup>5</sup> Music comes across as not dependent on being technically good or well recorded but rather as an essence some singers could bring into the songs having only one goal in mind: to make an impact on audiences. Making songs was not about the human frailties of singers or in any way self-reflexive stemming from singers' inner torments—it was about the beat and the hype around that beat; it is in that sense pop was about "superheroes" and not about people. These "superheroes" made songs that were honest, they sang about falling in love and dancing and had no second intentions when they sang about those things; they were untouchable like superheroes in the sense that few other people could reach large audiences while keeping their "coolness."

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<sup>5</sup> "But what did him in was the coming of Elvis Presley. The moment that Elvis had cut *Heartbreak Hotel*, [Bill] Haley was lost. Suddenly his audience saw him as he was—ageing, married, corny, square, deeply boring—and that was that. Within a year, he couldn't get a hit to save his life. It was cruel, of course. It was also inevitable" (Cohn 20).

While there were some superheroes, the biggest of them all were, naturally, the Beatles; for a few years, the intuitive songs of the Beatles took pop music to another level:

In their different styles, then, both Lennon and McCartney had gotten arty and their music changed. In the first place, their work had been brash, raucous, and the lyrics basic—*She Loves You*, *Thank You Girl*, *I Saw Her Standing There*. Good stuff, strong and aggressive, but limited. From about 1964 on though, they got hooked on the words of Bob Dylan and their lyrics, which had always been strictly literal, now became odder, quirkier, and more surreal. Message and meaning: suddenly it was creative artist time. (Cohn 134)

Until the advent of Dylan, then, pop music was an intuitive process in which only the best musicians survived. The economic point Cohn is making, and which has been ever since mostly disregarded, is that it was the commercial success that allowed singers to remain competitive; there is not a single moment in Cohn's approach indicating that the relationship between song-creating and money-making is in any way damaging or diminutive of the emotional investment made by the singers. But then, in comes the devil-like figure of Dylan with his peculiar hair and ragged clothes, with his bad guitar playing and funny harmonica phrases, and that nasalized quirky voice, humanizing everything for everyone: "Right then, pop began to be something more than a simple auto noise, it developed pretensions, it turned into an art form, a religion even and, in all of this, Dylan was the mover" (171). I believe this is the most relevant point in Cohn's rendition of pop music's first years: the idea that after Dylan everything changed, even physically (singers did not have to look like superheroes anymore, bands dropped the uniform-like presentation and began parading their natural features as crucial marks of their individuality). It is, in a strikingly not very far-fetched analogy, similar to Harold Bloom's view of Shakespeare as the center of the Western Canon, Shakespeare as the creator of the way we still articulate sentiments today, affecting everything coming after but also everything which had happened before. In *Behind the Shades*, Clinton Heylin, discussing Pat Boone's version of "Tutti-Frutti," claims that a division between people who only listen to music and those who just listen to the words was already opening up; had Boone known that the song was about anal sex, he would probably have abstained from covering it (15); it could be argued, and I believe it is Cohn's main assertion, that the topic of that song became relevant only after Dylan's success. In that sense, most of what will be said in this thesis assumes that Dylan's introducing art into pop music is in no manner harmful (ironically, it is the same argument that sanctions Cohn's book, since pop's intellectual relevance seems dependent on Dylan).

Richard Hell, in his autobiography, refers negatively to the edition of 'The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), noting something similar to the intellectualization referred to by Cohn, but adding a more common reproach to pop music when admitting the popularity of The Beatles was also a factor of disapproval:

I grew up on the Beatles. They were exciting when I was in the eight grade. It was dewy, highly delineated, cute rock and roll. The new record was embarrassing. The band was presenting itself in a winking music-hall getup, with a lot of dramatic orchestration, to explain social problems to us. The public-event nature of the album's release, following from the Beatles' incredible popularity, was like the Academy Awards on TV, glitzy but dull, and left me feeling not so much let down as left out, elsewhere, and a little tacky by association. (Hell 65)

Hell also recognizes Cohn's idea that 'The Beatles' music became, from that album on, somewhat intellectualized and, in a way, less honest (and, in turn, worse); contrary to Cohn, nevertheless, the main trace of dissatisfaction is found in the way 'The Beatles' extreme popularity reduces the possibility of enjoyment. Many have tried to reduce pop music to a popularity contest, claiming it is the product of commercial needs and, as such, a product of inferior quality; Cohn's approach is refreshing in the sense that it inverts such an expectation towards popularity, implying that what truly reduced pop's quality was a move towards artistic concerns. People who believe selling many records is an indication of poor quality are as wrong as people who believe quality is measured by the quantity of records sold; many of those who will be discussed in this thesis began making music as a reaction against what was being popularized as pop music but, in some cases, became themselves targets of younger generations as their popularity rose. Nonetheless, considerations on the perversity of popularity will be made according to particular biographies rather than as a relevant theoretical discussion towards what pop music is; in most cases, it is irrelevant to consider a song solely from that perspective. For me it matters more that, as in King's *Christine*, music is part of our lives, even when we are not fully aware of it.

Along the same lines, discussions about what counts as pop music, or any variant of it, are not central to what follows; they might be relevant in particular cases but only marginally do they matter in an overall outlook. Pop music will be referred to as the overall designation for music which became popular in the Western world from the 1950s on, particularly from the advent of rock and roll in the United States; as the Grove Dictionary states, the use of pop refers "to a particular group of popular music styles," serving the abbreviation to distinguish it from other strains of popular music abundant since the eighteenth century (commonly referred to as folk). The confusion in the use of

the term arises from the attempt to use pop as a genre in itself, yet I believe one can make the distinction according to the discussion at hand.

Terminology is, naturally, a problem that has to be dealt with. Assuming from the start that this is not a work on musicology, the terminology used will be that of literary criticism; while many musical terms might be used, literary descriptors such as stanza will be preferred to the use of verse. This is not just a question of literary terms but a way to dismiss misunderstandings, as verse refers to a combination of words and music, distinguishable from other song sections as chorus or instrumental sections. In the same line, the distinction between refrain and chorus bears a similar mark: the former referring to a set of words while the latter refers to the combination of words and music within song structures. This might seem to put the work off balance, assuming that the discussion will be surrounding the lyrical and not the musical part of songs; but what is at stake is a discussion of how all the aspects that go into making a song can be used in order to make it have a particular meaning. I assume from the start that poetry and music are not the same thing and so entail different sets of discussions, although songs can be treated, in most cases, as poems; nevertheless, these are poems where meaning depends not only on words but also on a set of features around those words (music being one of those features). After Dylan, pop music became an outlet for younger artists, particularly those interested in literature, specifically poetry; Hell, for instance, arrived in New York as a teenager with hopes of becoming a poet and found his poetic urge appeased by music making: “I got to live the ideal I’d had in mind when I came to New York to be a poet—to have a well-placed platform for saying things to the world, and an audience that thrived on it and wanted to have sex with me because of it, and I ran my own life, had no boss. And there were drugs and money” (161). There are many ways poetry and pop music differ, and an argument that it will not be made is that the best songs are the ones with more literary *panache*; as Hell also puts it, “good songs aren’t about literary invention (though it’s possible for them to have it, and I like trying)” (180). One always hopes that in the core of our work there are good things; hence, I hope what follows is mainly about good songs.

Finally, I should probably address the pertinence of the theme of the following essays, for some might not understand the inclination towards such a seemingly futile subject. Actually, most people believe pop music is young people’s music and, as such, a type of art where there is little or no complexity (if there is any art at all); Hell, for instance, notes that it is the art of the teenager exactly because it requires very few skills:

“Half the beauty of rock and roll is that ‘anyone can do it’ in the sense that it’s not about being a virtuoso but about just being plugged in in a certain way, just having an innocent instinct and a lot of luck. That’s why it’s the art of teenagers” (35). If anyone can do it, where is the art in it? Why is it even relevant? Concerning the first question, I hope several essays might clarify some of the art. Concerning the second question, there might be a few answers. One is the relevance pop music has in so many people’s lives. In King’s *Christine*, Leigh, on a date with Arnie, reflects on how she could feel all the potential underneath Arnie’s external appearance: “It was amazing, the way he had come out of his shell... the way he had *bloomed*. That was really the only word for it. She felt the smug, pleased satisfaction of a prospector who has suspected the presence of gold by certain signs and has been proved correct. She loved him, and she had been right to love him” (210). Arnie’s blossoming might be ascribed to his relationship to music, a relationship which changed his language, personality, looks and even body. As many can relate to, music plays an important role in the coming of age of some individuals; to some, as in Arnie’s case, it plays a decisive role as “sometimes the most innocuous and pathetic fumblers only become graced by the way they shine in songs. And this is half of what makes the music the art of adolescence—that it doesn’t require any verifiable skill. It’s all essence, and it’s available to those who, to all appearances, have nothing” (Hell 165). In this quote, Richard Hell is referring to music’s ability to regenerate its performers although the description might be extended to the audiences; if we take Leigh’s description of Arnie, one could see in his blossoming the work of music. As Leigh describes, Arnie had potential, an essence one might risk, that needed to be revealed—music made it come out. Earlier I claimed *Christine* is about a boy becoming a man, and this is exactly what I was referring to. Some might argue, against this, that the continual reverence to such music is an incomprehensible act; as McCandless, a friend of Roland LeBay, explains to Dennis, it makes a fool of some men to be always hearing “kid’s music”;<sup>6</sup> but for those who have become who they are by listening to music, tirelessly listening to it might be an act of survival. In Carpenter’s rendition of the story, the last words of the film are pronounced by Leigh, as she watches what is left of Christine being laid in the junkyard: “I hate rock and roll.” To some people, the dismissal of rock and roll is not the expected outcome of maturity but the dismissal of their own self. For others, even when they can dismiss music from their present, it is hard to

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<sup>6</sup> “That’s another thing that used to drive us all fucking bugshit, the way he always listened to that rock and roll music like he was some kid instead of old enough to qualify for Social-fucking-Security” (King 399).

dismiss it from their past. In the epilogue of King's *Christine*, Dennis Guiler tells how, even four years after the facts surrounding Arnie's death, he still has nightmares. In one of those nightmares, Dennis is haunted by the fear of being killed by Christine:

Richie is screaming 'La Bamba' to a Latin beat, and as Christine suddenly lunges toward me, laying rubber on the hall floor and tearing open locker doors on either side with her doorhandles, I see that there is a vanity plate on the front—a grinning white skull on a dead black field. Imprinted over the skull are the words ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE. (King 502)

At the time when Dennis writes this, Christine has been destroyed and the rumors about a strange accident involving a car in California might be just that, rumors; but the fear is revived in the fact that songs bring Christine's existence back to mind. In some cases, most cases, probably, keeping conversations about songs (or books, or paintings, or stamps) is a way of reassessing who one is.

## Literary Flirtation

In 1991, in his celebrated study of punk *England's Dreaming*, Jon Savage went to great lengths to speak with as many people as possible in order to achieve an accurate portrait of the period when punk took place. Among the many characters having a role in punk, Richard Hell was one of the most instrumental and so a conversation with him was in order. A prominent figure of the New York punk movement, Hell was associated with Television, he formed with friend Tom Verlaine, and later with Johnny Thunders and The Heartbreakers; he would eventually release an important album, *Blank Generation* (1977), with his band, Richard Hell and the Voidoids. Savage met Hell in the late 1980s, a period when Hell had relapsed into his drug addiction:

His look has gone around the world, yet he has been left with little. His *poète maudit* script has overtaken him. After a fruitless decade, he is trying to live in the here and now, but all everyone is interested in is a past which reminds him of how much he has lost. "Look," he says, fixing me with his bug-eyed glare, "I shouldn't have told you to come at all to waste your time."

After a routine sparring match, he gives me a copy of his latest poems, *Cuz*, for which I give him \$2.95. There is no communality here which makes me want to accept a gift. Hell's bitterness—caused, as he admits later, by the fact that the Sex Pistols achieved what he desired—is an index of the antagonism that begins to colour the relationship between London and New York from this point. By March 1975, England was nowhere: in New York there was already a thriving culture in CBGBs. (Savage, *England's Dreaming* 90-1)

It has been recognized by some critics that it was in fact Hell who served as the model for the Pistols, mostly stylistically; the story is probably correct, as it is known that Malcolm McLaren, the manager and mastermind behind the Sex Pistols, had been in New York in the early 1970s managing the by-then-decrepit The New York Dolls. That McLaren had contact with the New York early punk scene, which Hell was a part of, demonstrates it is in fact a possibility that Hell could have served as a model to the Pistol's fashion statements; since the Sex Pistols was the band responsible for punk's rise as a musical movement and for the definition of what punk was to become, Hell's relevance is, naturally, diminished. Savage's denunciation of Hell's false *poète maudit* attitude deserves, however, a second look, since it seems to bear an accusatory tone to the relation Hell kept with the literary world in his career. In fact, Savage is implying a core difference between American punk and English punk in the honesty with which both were approached by the bands; the literary connection implies an intellectualization of the music and, as such, a less honest approach to it: while British bands were illiterate



and put their hearts into their music, American punk was the result of artistic movements and theories that removed honesty and sincerity from the final product.

It was only natural that the success of British punk would amount to bitterness and resentment, particularly when Hell assumes his aspirations regarding music bore the prospect of attaining the recognition he had failed to find in his literary career. In that sense, in the late 1980s, music came to the same result as the literary endeavors Hell had put himself through with one remarkable difference: he was the prototype for one of the most important musical movements of the twentieth century whereas he was unknown in literary terms. As Savage notes, Hell's look had traveled the world without leaving much for him to show for; and as all anyone was interested in was the past, Hell had little to offer when they met if he even refused to tell stories from that past. Two decades after Savage's book, and almost forty years since the peak of the punk scene in New York, Hell would recognize Savage's point when discussing Dee Dee Ramone's methodology in his famous dealings with The Ramones:

Still, to me, it's interesting to try to figure out what's actually going on, what really happened. I want to get the most accurate idea I can of the way things are. To me, that's a lot of what "art" is about. Of course I have my vested interests too: even disregarding any pride involved, my earning power depends partly on my reputation and my role in past events, so I might try to straighten the record where I regard it as misrepresenting me. But I try to be as faithful to what happened as I can, however what happened might reflect on me. I want that to be part of my reputation too. Whereas Dee Dee's purposes were served more by keeping it funny, and maybe "funny" is more real than "true." (Hell 162)

Many years later, from the punk period and from meeting with Savage, Hell recognizes how his life became devoted to his relation to music in the 1970s and how his literary career, whether in fiction or in non-fiction,<sup>7</sup> became possible only because he was Richard Hell, the punk figure. It is noteworthy that while he believes his reputation should be as close to a real depiction of facts as possible, since that is what he believes art to be, there is not necessarily a causal relationship between reality and reputation, as he openly admits his reputation can sometimes misrepresent him; on a certain level, his reputation is out of his control as it is built on an accumulation of information he can only keep tweaking so it does not go astray.

Hell arrived in New York along with friend Tom Miller, whom he met at Sanford Preparatory, in Delaware, around 1966, and with whom he would eventually form Television, musically one of the most relevant bands of the 1970s. Before getting into

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<sup>7</sup> Hell never stopped pursuing a literary career, publishing novels and essays; he kept contributing to several magazines, mostly with musical related issues.

music, both pursued literary ambitions working on several magazine projects and even publishing their own magazine, *Genesis : Grasp*, aimed mainly at the publication of poetry. Among the most groundbreaking moves during the magazine's existence was the creation of the character Theresa Stern, a poet Hell created and furnished with a face composed by the superimposition of photographs of his own face with Tom Verlaine's, both wearing a black wig; the other high moment of the short-lived magazine was the refusal of an Allen Ginsberg poem submission. When literature did not pay off, and they both turned to music, they changed their names—Miller became Tom Verlaine while Richard adopted his famous surname by dropping his family name, Meyers; the move was probably an attempt to keep a proximity to literature, but the change allowed Hell to understand his dwellings in the literary world could be sustained by music:

The whole process of reconceiving ourselves as a band was interesting and satisfying. It hadn't occurred to me before how all-encompassing a self-invention or self-realization making a band could be, but the moment I began picturing myself in music, I understood. (Doubtless David Bowie was a signpost too, though I wasn't a fan of his. He seemed too artificial to me.) There was much more to having a band than writing and performing songs, and instantly I felt like I was in my element—that I could do this in a way that had hardly ever been done before, because it felt natural to me. (Hell 120)

Changing names is not enough to endow musicians or the music with they play with literary characteristics; what makes Hell's description interesting in literary terms is the idea he found an outlet in music for whatever it was he expected to accomplish with literature. I remember an English Literature teacher I had once remarking that, with some notorious exceptions, most poets have built their reputation on work written in the beginning of their careers;<sup>8</sup> as proposed by Hell in his autobiography, rock and roll (or pop music, as an aggregating genre) is the art of teenagers, and I maintain one can easily draw some conclusions on why pop music and literature might have a closer relation than many would like to account for (35). In any case, Hell's relation to music had a tone of surrogacy attached to it, implying music was a substitute for literature.

As the punk scene developed in New York, Hell became one of its main figures and more than the feeling his musical work was substituting writing, it was his position among a group of other artists that gave him the comfort of believing he was accomplishing through music what he had aimed at with literature; it was not so much the particular body of musical work he was building as it was the recognition that music brought him, acting as a compensation for the frustrated attempts at a writing career. As

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<sup>8</sup> The remark was aimed at underlining the relevance of the two exceptions noted about the generalization: Thomas Hardy and Philip Larkin; I hope the irony of the remark and of the two exceptions to it might be noticeable in the following essays.

a mixture of causal and consequential effects, Hell soon became the archetypal figure for youth in the artistic circles of New York even when he was obliged to down-to-earth jobs such as working at a construction site; as Allen Ginsberg's interest might attest to, even in those particular situations, Hell's noteworthy figure made an impact:

In the course of that construction job Allen Ginsberg once liked my looks on the street and invited me over. It made me think of Walt Whitman admiring the sweet-sheened torsos of laborers. I declined without hesitation, automatically, never having felt much rapport with Ginsberg from his writings, and because it wasn't within my range to give encouragement to a gay guy trying to pick me up, though it didn't bother me. (Hell 52-3)

As with refusing the poem submission by Ginsberg for his magazine, this rejection has more to it than a mere disliking of the poet; the jokes on Ginsberg are not motivated by dislike of his poetry but rather by the fact that Ginsberg's poetry stirred associations with the beat poets and the 1960s generation of musicians that these youngsters did not want to be associated with. Hell's ability to understand such associations as detrimental to his project was part of the instinct that led him to stand as a role model. While Television might have had a relevant musical legacy, that was due mainly to Tom Verlaine's abilities; Hell, on the other hand, had little to do with musical legacies: it was his attitude which helped shape punk as well as reject associations with the previous generation, even when those associations were not directly related to music.

Still, the irony in overlooking Hell's relevance to punk, particularly as a precursory figure, is better demonstrated by Hell himself, when he describes how he is aware he changed his style of playing to approach the Sex Pistols':

The Sex Pistols said "fuck rock and roll" but in the most blistering, rampaging rock and roll songs. I'd written and sung blistering rock and roll too, though another one of my songs, "Blank Generation," one that would inspire the Sex Pistols to write "Pretty Vacant," was performed in a more laid-back and dreamy, if sarcastic and sneering, style, until the Pistols upped the ante in undiluted rock and roll the way they did, and I started playing "Blank Generation" in a more aggressive style too. (Hell 199)

The Pistols' relevance to punk, and to music after the 1970s, is so blatant that the few singularities attached to punk seem to escape; for instance, the literary nature of the association between people in the early New York punk scene is mostly ignored or, as in Savage's position, snubbed. Savage is not completely wrong, for at a certain point, even Hell felt the need to be more like the Pistols, as if they had become what he wanted to be faster than he could do so; his influence on them was then mitigated by his own new style of performance and the removal of punk from the realm of literature heightened as the Pistols took the center of the punk canon.

Alasdair MacIntyre, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, addresses the relevance other human beings have, starting at an early age, to our development as rational animals. MacIntyre's argument is aimed at how we become capable of independent rational judgments, that is, how we become human beings; under MacIntyre's position, human beings are always dependent on other human beings and on the type of communities they grow up in since their decisions are always made in accordance to those environments:

What is or would be good or best for me is something on which, apart from the fact that generally and characteristically I know more about myself than others do, I may in many and crucial respects be no more of an authority than some others and in some respects a good deal less of an authority than some others. My physician, or my trainer, if I am an athlete, or my teacher, if I am a student, may well be better placed to make judgments about my good than I am. And so on occasion may my friends. About both goods in general and our own good in particular we have to learn from others, if we are to be able to judge truly for ourselves, and the others whom we first encounter as teachers are such persons as parents, aunts, nurses, and the like. What each of us has to do, in order to develop our powers as independent reasoners, and so to flourish *qua* members of our species, is to make the transition from accepting what we are taught by those earliest teachers to making our own independent judgments about goods, judgments that we are able to justify rationally to ourselves and to others as furnishing us with good reasons for acting in this way rather than that. (MacIntyre 71)

Among the people who might know more about us, and with artists this is obvious, one should probably count the biographer, even when he is only aiming at tenure; so to perhaps historians of punk, as Savage, have an important role in who Hell became by building the reputation Hell later struggles to preserve. In fact, concerns on how audiences perceive an artist's life are part of an anxiety several artists have addressed, disturbed by the separation between who they actually are and how they are perceived to be. What is interesting in overlapping MacIntyre with Hell is the fact that in the philosopher's terms it is as if Hell became able to make independent judgments about his own life very late; not only that, others had more relevance in his decisions than he, which might be accounted for as a strong kind of dependency. The acceptance of the Pistols' influence over his own way of playing music is the recognition of their role as his teachers; it is also an argument against the idea that only our earlier teachers, parents for instance, have relevance in making human beings capable of independent rational judgments. It means, first and foremost, that the ability to make independent judgments is highly overrated as a moment making us into the kind of human being we will become; furthermore, it means such moments are possible throughout our lives no matter how old we are.

Among many personal photographs, including from his childhood, of family, girlfriends, close friends, or of rarities from the bands, in Hell's autobiography one can

find a very peculiar photograph of Hell with Susan Sontag; it is one of a series of photographs taken by Roberta Bayley during Hell and Sontag's meeting, in February 1978, a meeting originally aimed at getting their conversation printed in *Interview* magazine. I want to look at three paragraphs from the pages where the encounter is described to understand how literary pretensions have unexpected consequences and how, even when one is not aware, it is our belief in other people's abilities that keeps us dependent on their proximity. In the first paragraph it is explained why Susan Sontag appears as a photograph-relevant character:

I'd long admired Sontag, as did most halfway literate people. She was about twenty years older than me and had been a trendsetter among New York intellectuals all that time. She set the standard for aesthetic and moral values, and for subtlety of perception, in her essays on literature and film (and dance and photography, and a few other art mediums). She affirmed an "erotics" of art rather than an interpretation of it. Furthermore she was beautifully physically and a gracious, charming person. (Hell 244)

It might be pertinent for Hell to note how Sontag had a prominent position in New York's intellectual *milieu* and to put forward how her work had been influential, yet the most striking part of his description is the last sentence—that she was beautiful and gracious. Many might disdain these qualifications as trivial but they are more meaningful than it might appear, and I believe this photograph was chosen exactly because of it; it is also the reason behind the meeting of the two personalities for the magazine article: they were both prominent in their fields, yes, but they were mostly attractive people with appeal to a fringe of 1970s New Yorkers. What Hell is doing with this inclusion in his biography is taking advantage of someone who holds a strong position within a field to which Hell aspires, in the hope her strength might rub off on his own work; that she is intellectually interesting and also good-looking is a happy coincidence that nonetheless is motivating enough to allow the meeting. The attraction is not one-sided, since Hell's position as the main figure in a vitalized musical scene, as a leader of a younger generation, might also have been the reason why Sontag agreed to meet him, hoping some of his coolness might rub off on her too.

Hell continues the description of the meeting with Sontag by relating how he tried to impress her, fighting for her attention against Victor Bockris', the journalist who had arranged the meeting:

It bugged me how tolerant Sontag was of Bockris in conversation, and, in retrospect, I'm surprised at how forbearing she was with me, too. Victor was always trying to sound shockingly insightful about modern culture, as if he were Andy Warhol crossed with Marshal McLuhan or something. He also

loved to name-drop. But his big pronouncements were clumsily fake and unamusing. (“Unless you have a full-time live-in person, most people don’t have the time to get sex,” he said that night.) It was instructive, if frustrating, to see how patient (in my view), or routinely respectful (in more neutral terms), Sontag was with him. I wanted her to bond with me.<sup>9</sup> (Hell 245)

Hell expects that Sontag bonds with him because he believes if that happens then he would be intellectually validated; Sontag’s tolerance with Bockris constitutes a problem in the sense any bonding with Hell would afterwards be tainted by her condescendence to Bockris. Yet, her manners with Bockris end up being described as instructive, as if the behavior of someone so intellectually noticeable could immediately be taken as the correct behavior to follow. This might mean people have relevance not according to particular hierarchic scales but according to how we perceive our lives and what we take to be relevant to these same lives; it is immaterial that these teachers might not be the proper teachers or that they do not exhibit teacher-like behavior—what is pertinent is how we perceive their lives and how much we believe those lives to be relevant in shaping our own.

After explaining how tolerant Sontag was with Bockris, Hell inserts a paragraph in which he explains that notwithstanding the petty little details it was a very comfortable and pleasant meeting; in Hell’s very straightforward autobiography, attested to by the several quotes already made, the following paragraph describing the exterior of the apartment stands out as an attempt at high art:

Still, it was a magical few hours, tucked cozily murmuring and laughing, in that little apartment perched five or six stories up into the whole nighttime city outside hung in glittering white curves, the street surfaces lit in blurry stains by the streetlights and signals and signs, the only sound the clicking of the traffic-light mechanisms, no people anywhere to be seen. (Hell 245)

What this small paragraph denotes is that closeness with literary affairs rubs off on Hell’s writing. It is Sontag’s proximity allowing such a stylistic deviance in the description of the city from the rest of the style of the book—it is her proximity that brings not just the style but also the description itself. The influence is so much more relevant as it arises from a memory: Hell is influenced by his recollection of a meeting, not by an intellectualization about Sontag’s theories or even by Sontag’s presence in his life—it was a few “magical” hours but nothing more beyond that. My argument, then, is related to the wrong idea about how influences are a result of certain degrees of exposition or from life-changing revelations; sometimes influences just rub off from people we meet

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<sup>9</sup> Bockris “pronouncement” was not as gratuitous as Hell makes it and it was actually made in reference to a story in *Voice* magazine (Bockris 192).

sporadically or from people we find physically appealing (that both aspects meet is, again, a happy coincidence). Just as the influence of the Sex Pistols made Hell change his way of playing, so to the recollection of the meeting with Sontag changed his way of writing, even if only for a paragraph—just as influences do not have to result from long expositions, they likewise do not have to have enduring consequences; we are, as long as we are alive, dependent animals, even when our actions cannot be fully accounted for rationally.

## Englishness

Donald Davie's attempt to praise Philip Larkin as a major figure in English poetry begins with the difficulty of attributing such weight to someone who, at the time (1973), had only three small volumes of poetry published (only one would follow); but maybe this is not a difficulty *per se* and might be looked at as an indication of Larkin's quality or, at least, as one of the features making him special. What Davie tries to demonstrate throughout the essay on Larkin is that not only is Larkin a true original poet but that he is a true English poet. In fact, one of the reasons for Larkin's special place in poetry seems to be the way his poetry so clearly denotes its Englishness. Davie's praise highlights Larkin's qualities that otherwise have been condemned by critics and fellow poets, explicitly the "damagingly insular and provincial" nature of the subjects that are featured in Larkin's poetry (71). Under attack by those critics is the diminished amplitude of those subjects, particularly the descriptions of landscapes and weather and their relation to a more general sense of humanity; "nature poetry," as Davie puts it, is usually treated as a metaphor for human feelings and seems to be only a vehicle for human-related subjects: "In other words, it's only when what seems to be a nature poem can be converted into a human-nature poem that we begin to take it seriously. [...] the encounter between human and nonhuman has no value and no significance until it can be made an allegory of an encounter between humans" (68). The attacks state that the relation between Larkin's descriptions and human nature does not insinuate relevant subjects; there is a kind of pettiness, a regional concern making it harder for inhabitants of other places to relate to that poetry and so the poems lose relevance in their dealings with humanity. Against such positions, Davie isolates those aspects not merely as a positive quality but as the defining quality of Larkin's poetry; furthermore, he highlights Larkin's originality by noting his use of nature poetry does not parallel similar uses of analogous poetry.

Davie contends that although this relation of nature poems and human feelings is expected when dealing with poetry, in Larkin it is not so obvious. The tone of neutrality adopted by Larkin allows for the descriptions to stand solely as descriptions of English landscapes, without diminishing them to the state of allegories. Davie argues the quality of the poems still stands even if the expected metaphorical treatment is applied and so Davie is contrasting two ways in which we relate to poetry: the literal sense, in which we



can recognize descriptions of a real world we move around in, and the metaphorical sense, in which the descriptions stand for something else:

And this is just as true if we think of landscapes and weather metaphorically; we recognize in Larkin's poems the seasons of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons of an English soul—the moods he expresses are our moods too, though we may deal with them differently. On the literal level at any rate, no one denies that what Larkin says is true; that the England in his poems is the England we have inhabited. (Davie 64)

Davie's assumption about Larkin's quality lies in the literal sense, where he can praise the technique, not in the second sense, from where many believe true poetry stems but where Davie sees nothing but commonplace conventions. In the literal sense, the Englishness of the descriptions is completely understandable since the quality of the descriptions permits the recognition of the spaces it depicts; the idea of an "English soul" seems harder to grasp although what seems to be implied is that if the literal sense is accurate towards what it is described, the "English soul" will inevitably follow, since the only place such a soul could come from is an English environment. What Davie is doing is describing Larkin's technique of depicting reality as virtuous: because Larkin's descriptions are virtuous, it follows that what there is in real life one might call Englishness naturally comes up in such descriptions. This seemingly bleak notion implies that Englishness naturally arises from the mere observation of real life: Englishness is there to be recognized by those who inhabit a certain geographical space and who share it in real life. Davie's Englishness is not so much a theory as it is an attack on the idea that it is possible to produce such a concept, moving against notions that Englishness is attainable by some kind of special technique; it is an attack on the idea Englishness survives in a past which no longer exists, or is waiting in an ideal future the present is not ready for yet. This is the nature of Davie's distinction between Larkin's use of English landscape and weather, and the naming of places which saturates John Betjeman's poetry; Davie's discerning intuition is that these poets contrast in the sense that "Betjeman is the most nostalgic of poets, Larkin the least" (65).

The lack of a nostalgic feeling in Larkin, Davie continues, arises from the levelness in the way he deals with his descriptions, not from a particular inability to relate to the feeling of nostalgia. This brings forward a kind of acceptance of ordinary life that seems crucial to Larkin, as if conceding any symbolic strength to those descriptions would amount to a fault:

[...] when Larkin in more ambitious pieces refuses to recognize any special dignity or sanctity attached to elemental presences like water, it is not because this sort of sentiment about the natural is foreign to his experience. He mostly refuses to allow such sentiments into the peopled landscapes of his England because they would impede his level-toned acceptance of that England as the only one we have, violated and subtopianized and poisoned as it is. (Davie 66)

What Davie is suggesting is that to introduce symbolic meaning into the descriptions would smear not only what is being described but above all it would disturb the technical use of language in those descriptions, something Davie considers Larkin's most relevant feature. It would also mean that Larkin would be interfering in what he describes, as if he aspired to making a political intervention through his poetry. Even more relevant for Davie is the way Larkin's descriptions of pastoral sceneries contain the waste of a post-industrialist society lacking any special emphasis as to its presence. Larkin's neutrality is more than just a writing technique but an approach to what he describes and passing judgments on what he sees is a kind of *faux pas* that would compromise simultaneously his technique and his personality. The critics claim this neutrality works as dehumanization since the people who inhabit these landscapes seem to be unaccountable for what surrounds them, "violated and subtopianized and poisoned" as it might be. Once more Davie turns the attacks into virtues, stating that this kind of position towards the subjects of Larkin's poetry represents a kind of extreme humanism; humanity exists within the descriptions, as an element of those landscapes, instead of being created to highlight any possible reading of the description. This allows these people's existence to be as relatable as the descriptions of pastoral elements within the landscapes—they too are part of England, with their faults and their seemingly irrational behaviors.

Davie's attempt to trace Thomas Hardy's influence over English poetry in the twentieth century has William Butler Yeats as the villain; the opposition lies in the religious connotations of Yeats against Hardy's concreteness: Yeats would take his belief in the witches of Endor all the way through by demonstrating they belong to a common heritage; Hardy would simply not believe in such folklore or in a particular sanctity in nature to bow to. The shift Larkin makes in his career from the influence of Yeats to the recognition of Hardy as a major influence relates to this lack of belief in the sanctity of things surrounding him: be it nature, folk tales, or, even more to the point, art; nothing outside the real world surrounding the poet has a special significance. It would seem, then, that Englishness surfaces from the observance of what surrounds the poet and not from an emphasis on the symbolic value attached to subjects from common life. So we find Davie praising Larkin as a suburban poet and describing England as the birthplace of suburbia, and all this starts resembling a tribute to middle-class; this tribute is even

more obvious once Davie admits that the extreme political poles are inhabitable, the right-wing because of the consequences of Second World War, the left wing because of its emphasis on leveling all differences that would leave no space for art. To this position of neutrality, many have answered contemptuously since it represents a form of non-commitment; Davie agrees with this kind of criticism, accusing the ironists of being more useful in the realm of politics than in the realm of poetry: “In fact, I suppose, all parliamentary politics in Britain belongs in the broad band of the political Center, which corresponds to the ironist’s evasion of choice, his wish to be paid on both sides though at reduced rates—and just as well perhaps, for the open-minded ironist is worth more in politics than he is in poetry” (71). Nonetheless, Davie is not saying that Larkin’s neutrality encompasses a lack of political position; on the contrary, Davie assumes Larkin has such a position, a political one that is, but maintains that that position comes necessarily from his inclusion in a society, a pressure inevitably felt by those who live in any kind of community.

Had Davie had the opportunity to include Larkin’s last published book (*High Windows*, 1974) in his study, he would have been able to recognize that Larkin’s position moved from an obvious neutrality towards a feeling of disenchantment; this feeling runs along the description of “Going, Going,” although, again, not in a nostalgic manner in which the past is an Eden we should return to:

That before I snuff it, the whole  
Boiling will be bricked in  
Except for the tourist parts—  
First slum of Europe: a role  
It won’t be so hard to win,  
With a cast of crooks and tarts.

And that will be England gone,  
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes  
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.  
There’ll be books; it will linger on  
In galleries; but all that remains  
For us will be concrete and tyres.

The pastoral landscapes are menaced by extinction; descriptions of landscapes of England will remain through artistic representations but nothing more: there will be nature poetry and nature painting, but no more nature to describe. As Davie explained, there is no attempt of reading decay symbolically as if, in some way, it stood for the poet’s position on English people or humanity: that is just how things are and what goes on in the poem is the disenchantment with the state of things and with the people who

are responsible for that state. Much more striking is the consequence this lack of symbolism has on the idea that books or paintings preserve a certain kind of feeling: they are records of what no longer exists, not a repository of Englishness. If the future holds a grim aspect, it will be in that grimness that Englishness will exist.

Larkin's self-publicized allegiance to Hardy denotes a technical appraisal in addition to the statement of a neutral position towards the use of the commonplace in literature; this is not an ideological position, but instead an acceptance of a type of reality. What is more refreshing in Davie's assessment of Larkin's work is the bypass of the old stale idea of identifying Englishness with a kind of position towards social classes; for all relevance a class system might have had in England, that is not the sole distinguishing factor that makes England different. Larkin's lack of ambition puts him at odds with the normal idea of Englishness, in the sense that class membership does not entail an attempt of upward movement or a reaction towards that membership:

[...] a man is what he is by virtue of his class membership. His sentiment of being, his awareness of his discrete and personal existence, derives from his sentiment of class.

And the converse is also true. The novelists gave judicious approval to upward social mobility so far as it could be achieved by energy and talent and without loss of probity. But they mercilessly scrutinized those of their characters who were ambitious to rise in the world, vigilant for signs of such weakening of the fabric of personal authenticity as might follow from the abandonment of an original class position. It was their presumption that such weakening was likely to occur; the names given to its evidences, to the indication of diminished authenticity, were snobbery and vulgarity. (Trilling 115)

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling's view of class membership seems to be characterized by a fake conformism in which members belong to a class as a transitory moment in their way up to the next class. People are always in a state of wanting more: more culture, more fashion, more reputation, and, naturally, more money; this means authenticity is always very hard to account for, even though it seems clear that in nineteenth century novels an effort was made to describe precisely what features comprised the common member of each class in order to ascribe authenticity, or lack of it, to the characters they portrayed. Authenticity, in Davie's terms, seems to lie outside class membership and in Larkin it is transferred into the technical ability to describe an environment; in a simple way, authenticity derives from how one makes use of technique to describe his own environment: authenticity is connected with technical ability. It then seems possible to establish a relation between the things one does and who one is, which appears more relevant than the social position one has.

Davie's work on Larkin is naturally oriented towards his main goal of establishing Hardy as a major influence in English poetry of the twentieth century and so he was

concerned with a particular aspect of Larkin's poetry. Were his concern wider, he would likely take his argument further, for if his comments on Larkin's poetry of nature are true, they extend beyond it. Larkin's poetry is probably best defined, in a broader view, by the wish the poet addresses to Sally Amis, Kingsley Amis' daughter, upon her birth ("Born Yesterday," *Collected Poems*); against everyone else's wishes for a special life, full of great qualities and accomplishments, Larkin wishes "not the usual stuff" but that the newborn child may be "ordinary." If all the good things and special features others wish for the girl may come to be, then the girl will be a lucky girl; relying on luck is not, naturally, something one should accept as a way of living, so in the second stanza, along with his wish, Larkin explains what he means by ordinary:

Tightly-folded bud,  
I have wished you something  
None of the others would:  
Not the usual stuff  
About being beautiful,  
Or running off a spring  
Of innocence and love—  
They will all wish you that,  
And should it prove possible,  
Well, you're a lucky girl.

But if it shouldn't, then  
May you be ordinary;  
Have, like other women,  
An average of talents:  
Not ugly, not good-looking,  
Nothing uncustomary  
To pull you off your balance,  
That, unworkable itself,  
Stops all the rest from working.  
In fact, may you be dull—  
If that is what a skilled,  
Vigilant, flexible,  
Unemphasised, enthralled  
Catching of happiness is called.

Ordinary, in Larkin's use of the word, does not mean to be vulgar but to be balanced, to have equilibrium in what defines someone; to have an "uncustomary" feature, that is a quality surpassing other qualities, "stops all the rest from working." The small number of poems Larkin actually published might now be seen as an extension of this quality, since one must not exacerbate one's virtues too much as one runs the risk of stopping all others from working.<sup>10</sup> In Larkin, ordinariness is part of the writing technique and it is

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<sup>10</sup> Larkin's distaste for the innovations in jazz from the 1930s on might be related to this: the notion that to survive on the exacerbation of a particular talent is not virtuous at all but a desperate way of earning a living (as expounded, for instance, in *All That Jazz*).

not merely a programmatic disposition; ordinariness is not thematically addressed by the poems but a way of writing those poems. What is relevant in this assessment of ordinariness is the fact that, as underlined by the poem, it is not a quality confined to the poem but expands to every aspect of the poet's personality; the relation between the poet's life and the poet's work is thus concomitant, poetry being, as is any other activity, an extension of the poet's personality. The consequence of such a position involves the difficulty of addressing a poem without considering it to be an extension of someone's personality; a poem without a poet is understandable only because we indulge in language games. Naturally, one might not be able to assess a poet's temperament by looking at a single poem and so one requires a bulk of poems to have an idea about who their author is; by presenting his technique in his poetry, the poet is presenting himself and one requires such presentation to understand a poem. This being so, when Davie whispers about some of Hardy's poems that "we must trust the poem, not the poet" (45), he is not dismissing the author as irrelevant but once more attesting to the relevance of technique in a poet's work; he is making clear that poets are to be trusted only through their work and not by their descriptions of that work.

## Proletarian Tradition

Autobiographies are a difficult subject to deal with: always on the verge of fiction, dependent on selective memory and self-glorification, and most often concerned with reputations and justifications over what time has turned into trivial matters. Ewan MacColl's is just another example of the problems relating to the genre. Peggy Seeger, his long time companion, in the introduction to MacColl's autobiography, notes that the most obvious memory lapses are the entire duration of the Second World War and his second marriage (with the mother of two of his children); while there might be other lapses and some memories seem to be obviously one-sided versions perfected through years of retelling, Seeger assures the readers the book is a fair rendition of who the author was. Implied in her opinion is the idea that, while facts and fictions may merge or be hard to distinguish, there is an overall authenticity to the endeavor from which the man's personality becomes salient. Lionel Trilling refers to the subject of autobiographies in these terms:

If he is an artist the individual is likely to paint self-portraits; if he is Rembrandt, he paints some three-scores of them. And he begins to use the word "self" not as a mere reflexive or intensive, but as an autonomous noun referring, the O.E.D. tells us, to "that... in a person [which] is really and intrinsically *be* (in contradistinction to what is adventitious)," as that which he must cherish for its own sake and show to the world for the sake of good faith. The subject of an autobiography is just such a self, bent on revealing himself in all his truth, bent, that is to say, on demonstrating his sincerity. His conception of his private and uniquely interesting individuality, together with his impulse to reveal his self, to demonstrate that in it which is to be admired and trusted, are, we may believe, his response to the newly available sense of an audience, of that public which society created. (Trilling 25)

If all of the above were applied to Ewan MacColl's autobiography, we would not be far from a correct description of his effort. A small twist in the tone of this autobiography, however, should be noted: MacColl did not consider himself an artist. Not considering himself an artist is a political decision, an ideological position having its origin in the communist belief that artists are closer to the working-class if they consider themselves workers: so he defines himself not as an artist but as a craftsman. This claim contaminates everything MacColl is doing in his autobiography—as surely as it contaminated everything in his life.

The book is divided in three parts: the first is a very detailed account of his youth in Salford, near Manchester; the second deals with his coming of age in several theater groups all in some way connected with the Communist party; finally, the third part deals

exclusively with his connection to music. The exhaustively detailed first section is the flame igniting all the rest: it is the slum-like landscape of Manchester that builds MacColl's intellectual disposition and it is that space which allows the singer to be connected to the folk tradition he will help to revitalize in the 1950s and 1960s. It is made clear, from early on, that this lucky birth into a working-class community<sup>11</sup> is the only way he had of being able to handle certain traditional materials. This is something Trilling touches upon in his study when he notes "traditionally the family has been a narrative institution: it was the past and it had a tale to tell of how things began, including the child himself; and it had counsel to give" (139). Songs were passed on between family members and had special functions in family life, being associated with holidays, certain activities or even with seasons of the year; because these family traditions were very closely related to the family's economic status, the relation between songs and social class was very strong—traditional songs are thus relatable to the working class not only by lyrical reference but also by the use they were given.

In MacColl's theory there is the inference that only people born in such *milieux* can work honestly with traditional songs, since their relation to those songs is authentic by means of their upbringing. This simultaneously refers to the fact these songs belong to a certain kind of people and only a certain kind of people can understand those songs. The problem MacColl has with the way other classes use working-class songs is related to the social functions songs had during his childhood, something which explains the detail he goes into when describing that period of his life; it is his strong belief that songs reenact the working-class struggle for survival and so, when used by members of other classes, they lose their true meaning and, as so, their relevance. In the end, the social function of songs for MacColl is similar to the three palliative measures Freud enumerates as a way of coping with the hard reality in *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

The life imposed on us is too hard to bear: it brings too much pain, too many disappointments, too many insoluble problems. If we are to endure it, we cannot do without palliative measures. (As Theodor Fontane told us, it is impossible without additional help.) Of such measures there are perhaps three kinds: powerful distractions, which cause us to make light of our misery, substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it, and intoxicants, which anaesthetize us to it. Something of this sort is indispensable. (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* 14-5)

MacColl's hard world precludes spaces outside working-class environments and so Freud would be going a bit too far in generalizing humanity's hardships in such a way; yet the

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<sup>11</sup> "It was my good fortune to grow up in a working-class community, to pass my formative years in the bosom of a politically conscious family. They provided me with riches that have sustained me throughout my life" (MacColl 370).



point is that songs may have a palliative function to which their meaning is subsumed. It remains in question how to know when a song does not have a palliative use and whether there are meanings that resist the several uses a song might have.

It would be easy, for someone not sharing a socialist idea of community, to say songs lose the essence connecting them to the identity of certain communities once variations and special innuendos are introduced by singers from other communities. Nonetheless, there are examples of songs sung collectively at certain moments which make it harder to dismiss the idea songs do not carry identity. For one, we have national anthems, which seem to induce a kind of respect other songs do not. However, it is still easy to attribute the reactions caused by national anthems to bad habits picked up during childhood. Trickier cases are soccer crowds. There are some examples of soccer crowds using songs in very unusual manners (by songs I do not mean the usual soccer chants). In the 2005 Champions League final, just before the start of the second half, the Liverpool fans burst out singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone”;<sup>12</sup> their team was down by three and would eventually make a comeback to win the game. Singing it was simultaneously a request for belief from the players and a statement of belief by the fans—it was saying there was an unbreakable bond between fans and players as long as their feeling complied with the request made by the song. The same song had a different connotation when, in the aftermath of the 2004 Madrid bombings, a speaker at Celtic Park asked the fans to sing the song in tribute to the victims; the game was against Barcelona, and the moment was indeed impressive. As with the Liverpool fans, the song implied that the victims of the bombings had a bond with the voices singing—identity was related not with the Protestant community of Liverpool, or with the Catholic community of Glasgow, but with an unbreakable bond between human beings. During the 2012 European Cup, in another example, the Irish fans burst out singing “Fields of Athenry”<sup>13</sup> when their national squad was down by four against the at-the-time-almighty Spain; there was no chance of a comeback and so this was a kind of recognition that a defeat of the team is not the defeat of a people—it was a performance of more than ten minutes showing that those who were losing out on the field were not alone.

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<sup>12</sup> “You’ll Never Walk Alone” is a song by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, written originally for the musical *Carousel* (1945). The song was later recorded by many performers and became a favorite among soccer fans, particularly emblematic for the Liverpool FC and Celtic FC fans.

<sup>13</sup> “Fields of Athenry” is a song composed by Pete St. John in the 1970s, relating events that took place during the Great Irish Famine in the nineteenth century. It has been recorded by many artists, particularly Irish artists, and has been adopted as a sports anthem in different places with adapted lyrics.

These three examples indicate that a song's meaning depends on the use given to it. Nonetheless, one must wonder why these particular songs were chosen for the purpose and if that choice was made because the songs hold a meaning shared by at least some people. MacColl would argue the stadiums where those collective events took place are no longer places where the working-class is welcomed, that they are filled with members of the middle and upper classes and so the songs do not refer to the working class anymore. Already in 1991, in *Among the Things*, Bill Buford was claiming that football violence in Britain was a direct consequence of the dissolution of the working class, asserting the football crowd was majorly composed of individuals gathering under the designation 'working-class': "a piece of language that serves to reinforce certain social customs and a way of talking and that obscures the fact that the only thing hiding behind it is a highly mannered suburban society stripped of culture and sophistication and living only for its affectations" (265). One could argue another reason to defend songs have a meaning that is not class contained is the fact these songs are used by the upper classes to the same effect the working classes would use them. This would indicate that MacColl would be wrong in assuming the meaning of songs was only class relatable but that he would be right in saying there is a structural essence, a spirit, intrinsically related to their meaning.

From the moment MacColl met Alan Lomax, the American ethnomusicologist, his ideas on the value of songs shifted and he began treating folk songs as different materials from the ones used by artists (musicians): he would be dealing with pieces of the people's identity in contrast with artist's individual materials. In his assessment of what he did with those materials, he believed he brought forward the conscience and identity of the true English "soul" by making the essence of the songs manifest. On the basis of these assumptions, MacColl's legacy is somewhat dubious: on the one hand, he is one of the main figures of the second English folk revival,<sup>14</sup> one of the most energetic gatherers of traditional songs, and one of the most poignant singers of his generation; on the other hand, as a founding member of the Critics' Group, he is responsible for the set of rules known as the "policy club," a set of rules stipulating how the singers should behave, how they should sing and what kind of materials they could perform:

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<sup>14</sup> In *The British Folk Revival*, Michael Brocken identifies two folk revivals in the twentieth century: one in the first decades, preceding the First World War, and the second arising immediately after the Second World War. Brocken also disputes the idea that both these revivals were exclusively the result of a working-class urge for self-definition, stating that both are highly dependent on the interest of the middle-classes of each period (3, 18).

The policies of MacColl and his supporters, in searching for both the authentic and the repertoire, resulted in a kind of schema in which music was reordered into categories of tradition, realism, and fakeness. Styles of singing were also brought into the equation; it was debated, for example, whether a folk song actually remained a “folk” song if it was performed in what was viewed as a contemporary manner. Contemporary meant a number of things: firstly if the vocal inflection was “American”; secondly if it was vocally “syncopated”; thirdly if the singer added instrumentation to (say) a ballad that was considered to be extant as an unaccompanied artifact.

[...] according to MacColl and Peggy Seeger there had to be a correct way of singing a traditional song and a level of consonance had to be reflected. Therefore the Critics’ Group were also assembled in order to analyse each other’s singing. The Critics’ Group was interested in vocal nuances, inflections and timbres that could be described as “authentically English” (the historical questions begs to be asked “how did they know?”). (Brocken 35-6)

These rules are often the main reason of discord in the assessment of MacColl’s relevance in English folk, since they seem to have shortened the access of new singers to the club circuit where folk was performed, narrowing, some say, the scope of the folk revival to a small circle of enlightened singers. Apart from the quibbles about the singer’s relevance, one must note that MacColl also complains, at certain moments, about the pure traditionalists who do not accept new material or even accompaniment to the songs. Side by side with these, MacColl seems a revolutionary set on destroying tradition; but one should not forget that it was MacColl, along with Peggy Seeger, who allegedly tried to bar Bob Dylan’s entrance to the Singer’s Club, in 1962. According to MacColl, it was Dylan, and his success in America, fueling the new generation of singers to change the techniques of the old singers, the ones allegedly truly worried about the authenticity of the songs, and it was against these new generation’s changes that the “policy rules” were introduced (Dylan is, again, the villain). In any case, MacColl refused to see himself as an old man unable to admit change and so he often states how he and his wife were set on introducing changes to folk repertoire by the addition of new original songs as well as by renovating old songs, songs he considered “tough” enough to survive such changes (332).

In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson would wryly note that “the belief that a man’s ideas are wholly the product of his economic setting is of course as fatuous as the belief that they are wholly independent of it” (19); for MacColl, the economic setting was everything and the mere idea of someone pretending it was not would be irrational. Naturally, MacColl’s own position on new songs is a contradiction to the stern opposition he raised against the folk variations introduced by Dylan, since it implies that traditional songs are not as tough as he believed—they do not resist electricity, for instance. Nevertheless, the most controversial position here is the idea that traditional songs have an essence which can be replicated under the right conditions, such conditions as class membership, honest intentions, or the right spirit. MacColl refers

ambiguously to a “folk idiom” (277), something that might be a technique or the compliance to the conditions which constitute a true traditional song. Curiously enough, MacColl’s most famous original compositions are “The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face” and “Dirty Old Town,” two songs popularized mostly by pop singers and seldom connected to their original creator; a further irony, of course, is the fact that “Dirty Old Town” is now more commonly associated with Ireland and Dublin than with the Salford it depicts.

It is possible to admit Salford is salient in “Dirty Old Town,” but when sung by The Dubliners it sounded very much like a depiction of Dublin; in the 1980s, when The Pogues sang it, there was no doubt it was an Irish song. This might arise from the relation between singer and song, as MacColl believed that relation to work:

I believe it is necessary to make a distinction between those men and women who are regarded by their communities, and by themselves, as singers and those who are song-*carriers*, that is people who can carry a tune and who carry in their heads a repertory of old songs. The singers, naturally, know the songs and regard them as their own, their private property on which they have put a personal stamp in the form of melodic ornaments and cunning rhythmical variations. The choice of a particular ornament or a way of phrasing or, indeed, of a particular pace, is rarely involuntary or below the level of conscious intention. Folk-song and folk singing have their own disciplines but inside those disciplines the singer is free to choose and, if he wishes, free to invent. The proliferation of song and ballad versions is not at *all* due to lapses of memory or imperfect hearing. Perhaps more than a few versions are the work of singers who didn’t like a tune or who found that this or that stanza didn’t lie easy in the mouth. Like dancers, composers, dramatists, actors, poets and potters, they display different levels of skill and creativeness. Some are good, some less good and some downright awful. The same goes for degrees of intelligence. It is a kind of reverse snobbery to regard all field singers as infallible custodians of the folk memory. But good, bad or indifferent, few singers I have ever met are content to present the listener with an exact copy of the way their mother, father, uncle, aunt or grandmother sang it. (MacColl 335)

The most problematic issue in this distinction between singers and song-*carriers* is the fact it is very hard to distinguish one from the other, particularly if we take to heart the claim no singer, good or bad, reproduces songs in the same manner as he first heard them. The position seems close to Walter Benjamin’s comment on the decay of storytelling, in which the continual production of a story would be carried out by people to whom MacColl refers to as *carriers*; in Benjamin, the distinction is made between oral tradition and written tradition, what he refers to as “short story”:

In point of fact, he [Modern man] has succeeded in abbreviating even storytelling. We have witnessed the evolution of the “short story,” which has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings. (Benjamin 92)

Benjamin's distinction, as many within MacColl's autobiography, resides in the level of knowledge the subject has; a story teller, as a song-*carrier*, would be someone without a formal technical education in writing, or music, and thus out of criticism's reach (although MacColl holds their quality can vary). In opposition to these amateurs, both Benjamin and MacColl propose the figure of the specialist, an individual who creates from given materials, making those materials unique to him (something very close to what could be described as an artist)—virtue, in both instances, lying with the amateur.

In a long explanation on how to sing ballads, MacColl describes how he deals with a ballad in much the same way as he would deal with the staging of a play; not only is the reference to theater constant, with comparisons to great tragedies like *King Lear* or *Agamemnon*, but also the way in which the story of the song is broken down to the smallest action and how that action would best be rendered through singing (328-41). He believes this approach allows him to use his vocal technique in order to come closer to the true meaning of a song and so, in a way, to the essence of that song. What is peculiar in his approach is the sanctity he attributes to the songs, a sanctity he does not concede to theater. It is his belief that these traditional materials hold something special in their structure, since the continuous changes introduced by singers (whether amateurs or specialists) do not seem to affect their original meaning (which is, for MacColl, always identifiable). With "Dirty Old Town," song-*carriers* might have induced the Irish tonality, however, one must wonder, without any cynicism, what has happened to the essence of the song if Salford was so easily interchangeable with Dublin; someone might say the working-class *milieu* it describes is internationally relatable, yet, that is a disappointing explanation: as much as socialists want people to believe the existence of a factory in any given town makes it freely interchangeable with other towns with a factory, one must not take that interchangeability for granted. Concreteness about places, the act of naming places, immediately changes the way one perceives the descriptions that can be made of those places; furthermore, as seen by Larkin's and Betjeman's examples, concreteness seems to be an important feature in bringing about the idea of Englishness central in their poetry and central to MacColl's singing. The appeal "Dirty Old Town" holds lies exactly in the abstract nature of its description, making it easily relatable to many different geographical places; it is that abstractness that makes the song sound so traditional-like.

It is the difficulty in articulating the need for concreteness with the necessary amount of abstractness which puts MacColl's theories off balance. For MacColl, songs

have a meaning as repositories of a people's identity; they are thus used to describe a particular world and to cope with that world: songs exclude the fantasy and ethereal tendencies of the classical repertoire:

When it comes to dealing with the real world, the world in which people live, work, love and die, the traditional song-makers and singers are, in my opinion, far superior to their counterparts. This is not to say that folk-song doesn't have its *longueurs*. Of course it does; but I would venture to say it has fewer than the classical repertoire. Its texts, even when they are in decline, are a good deal more interesting. Their protagonists, unlike those in most classical songs, are recognizable human beings. Their names have not been chosen from a dictionary of classical mythology—there are no Chlorises or Philidasas, no Corinnes, Hectors, Ganymedes or Leanders in the folk-songs—just Maggie and Annie and Jeans, Willie, Jimmie and Hugh.

In classical love songs, the lovers exist only to love and be loved or, alternatively, to love in vain. They inhabit an abstract landscape, as do lovers in contemporary rock songs, and the season is always summer. In traditional songs, love flourishes throughout the year; a young woman encounters her love "early, early in the spring," "on a cold winter's morning" or "during the falling of the leaf." (MacColl 274)

Concreteness seems to be the most relevant feature and what distinguishes the quality of folk from other kinds of music, particularly, in this description, classical and rock music. But, as already noted, the description of Salford in "Dirty Old Town" seems interchangeable with Dublin, and one might inquire how interchangeability works between singers of different generations and different musical backgrounds.

MacColl's "My Old Man" is probably a good example of how the contradictions between tradition and new songs might come up: the lyrics and delivery of the song are used to induce the traditional tone accomplished by MacColl; but at a certain moment that tone seems crushed by the use of a specific date:

My old man he was fifty-one  
What was he to do?  
A craftsman moulder on the dole  
In nineteen thirty-two.

The introduction of the date, 1932, as well as the reference to the "dole," brings a tension to the song in the sense that while everything pointed towards a traditional song and so to a far away past, one suddenly has to deal with a precise date and with the interpretative questions it poses. The date underlines the political position the song is clearly reaching for while simultaneously trying to fit in with a bulk of songs typically abstract.<sup>15</sup> As seen before, MacColl cannot explain this process of mixing concreteness and abstractness without falling into contradiction; however, when Ewan MacColl sings,

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<sup>15</sup> Naturally, traditional songs can be used for political purposes, but such a use is usually an adaptation of a particular meaning to a specific situation; it is not a consequence of songs openly addressing political issues (although, as expected, some do).

as a result of his particular vocal technique, one hears and understands the Englishness in the songs—it is that, I believe, which MacColl is constantly referring to as the essence of the song. Unlike Davie’s depiction of Larkin, Englishness does not derive from virtuous descriptions; and unlike Betjeman’s nostalgic use of topography, it also does not derive from concreteness. On the contrary, “My Old Man” seems to attest that concreteness is in fact an obstacle to the relation between the song and an idea of Englishness. As in Larkin, MacColl’s Englishness derives from technique, but in this case, vocal technique.

## Preserving Sanity

By 1968, Ray Davies, singer and songwriter of The Kinks, was disillusioned with the way the music industry was handling the band's career; adding to that, there was the feeling everything was conspiring towards forcing the band to adopt more fashionable approaches to songs, which meant taking on the American kind of sound that got airplay, with its strong blues and folk influence. In his autobiography, *X-Ray*, Davies sighs a weird complaint about the relation of the several branches of the music industry towards the band: "Now [1968] the BBC monopolized the airwaves, and for many of the emerging DJs, the Kinks sounded too English. While everybody thought the hip thing was to drop acid, do as many drugs as possible and listen to music in a coma, the Kinks were singing songs about lost friends, draught beer, motorbike riders, wicked witches and flying cats" (361). Taking into account former descriptions of poems and songs concerning the identity of England, one must be puzzled by the statement that The Kinks "sounded too English" on account of singing about such themes as draught beer or flying cats. One might recognize, not only in the covers of American songs they were required to do but also in the general tone of the band's first records a sound inspired by the early rock and roll of the 1950s; Jon Savage, in *England's Dreaming*, explains in this manner the impact of rock and roll in Britain:

Rock'n'Roll landed in the British Isles like a Martian spaceship. There was scarcely the Afro-American music or subculture here that could prepare anyone for the brutality and sheer sexual explosiveness of the records that, between 1954 and 1959, seemed to drop from heaven like the offerings of a cargo cult. These records were so transforming that nobody who heard them could find a language to explain them except in the phrases of the songs themselves, which talked in tongues: "A Wop A Loop Bop," "Be Bop A Lula." From these alien incantations was born the quasi-religious fervour with which the British still celebrate pop. (Savage, *England's Dreaming* 47)

It was under this influence that The Kinks' first albums were commercialized; but then, as Nik Cohn best describes, "Ray Davies, the singer, started writing their singles for them and he was good" (166). Not only was he good, he was able to turn The Kinks' music into something which became the archetypal English sound. What is it that makes The Kinks sound English? Many have pointed out that the band's stylistic shift towards song structures more related to the structure of the music hall, popular throughout Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was the main reason for the English sound they disseminated; however, Davies believed the nature of the accusation of



sounding too English was rooted in more significant things, namely in the themes he chose to write about. It seems fairly obvious, from a certain moment on, particularly since Davies assumed the role of composer for the release of *Face to Face* (1966), that he built his songs in order to exacerbate the aspects that made them sound English. But the list of themes he says made The Kinks sound English could easily be in the list of songs of a band that dropped acid in the hip fashion he criticizes. So one must recognize that, at certain points of Davies' career, sounding English was just the result of not sounding American.

Davies' autobiography, as MacColl's, is another instance of a strange way of recollecting one's life; it is a kind of fiction in which a nineteen-year-old journalist, employed by a menacing 'Corporation', which is interested in Raymond Davies' biography, attempts to reconstruct the nebulous glory days of The Kinks. The book enacts the boy's dealings with Davies, their conversations as well as the Corporation's plot against Davies and the public memory of the band. While there are many points in which Davies' accounts of his story might be fuzzy, there are still some clairvoyant moments as when Davies explains what he believed to be his function as a songwriter (here stated by the book's narrator): "In a way I understood R. D.'s [Ray Davies] attitude towards this period in his life. Even so, without seeming like a prude, I was a little shocked by these yarns. Something inside me wondered if R.D. was weaving fact together with fantasy. He was, after all, supposed to be a great story-teller: that is one of the functions of a songwriter" (Davies 131). The importance Davies attributes to the themes he sings about derives from this idea that a songwriter is a storyteller and that a storyteller must deal with materials close to his own experience, much as Ewan MacColl would claim for his folk songs. In "Waterloo Sunset," for instance, Davies counterintuitively introduces a specific geographical space not in order to reduce the scope of his subject, but to augment the "canvas" he is writing on: "I started writing a song about Liverpool that implied that the era of Merseybeat was coming to an end, but I changed it to "Waterloo Sunset" not only because that gave me a bigger canvas to work on but because it was about London, the place where I had actually grown up" (338). The most relevant implication of this change rests in the idea that as a Londoner Davies feels more comfortable talking about a place geographically closer to the place he grew up in and knows better. As Davies recognizes, "Waterloo Sunset" is a collection of memories from his childhood, watching the world from the window of his room, which means that by changing the song to be about Waterloo he was able to introduce his own

experiences as part of the song, thus clarifying why *Waterloo* is thematically less restrictive than *Liverpool*. As a storyteller, he seems compelled to be true to the materials he uses and *Liverpool* came in via *The Beatles*, which means it came in second hand. So the canvas is augmented because *Waterloo* has meaning to the singer and not because it is a bigger place than *Liverpool*. In this sense, *The Kinks'* Englishness is a direct consequence of Davies' depiction of his own life as an English citizen.

Ewan MacColl would probably respect Davies' approach to songwriting if only the form it was done was in accordance with the spirit described; if it is true there had to be honesty towards subjects, *The Kinks* varied their sound often, switching from the pop structures more common in British bands to more American influenced song structures. But one must not neglect the social pressures affecting one's life, and if we look at a song like "Death of a Clown," from *Something Else by The Kinks* (1967), we must note how Dylan's success with *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) is reflected in the manner Davies sings.<sup>16</sup> This is another example of how Dylan's influence over the musical landscape of the 1960s stretches far beyond the circle of folk music, reinforcing Cohn's assertion nothing remained the same after Dylan. As Davies assumes, the instinctive nature of what he did, his influences, are relatable to his daily life—and the people he relates to are not only family members but also bands from the 1950s and early 1960s, most of all *The Beatles*. As in MacColl's distinction between singers and song-carriers, Davies does not believe the essence of what he did could have been taught:

If I'd gone to college to learn music and finish my education I would have just been another expert. What I did, what I *do*, is unique to me. [...] I did try learning the piano again, learning about music, when I was in my late twenties. I went to this piano teacher in North Finchley. She taught me wonderful things about music I had never even considered, but I found that the more I learned, the less of my instinctive self was in my music. It was other people's invention, what other people had written, other rules. (Davies, *X-Ray* 73)

Instinct, then, is closely connected with truthfulness; the uniqueness in the process of writing songs derives from the fact they could not be replicated by anyone else since they are a result of the singer's particular life (form and substance are intrinsically connected). This means the volatility, which accompanies the singer's life, is passed on to the songs, making them vary in accordance to the singer's personal changes (and making them vulnerable, naturally, to influences such as the one exerted by popular bands). So the themes of social mobility which come up during the first years of the band give way to

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<sup>16</sup> Davies is conscious of this influence, as he describes in his autobiography (349-59).

self-reflexivity in later songs and eventually return to American-influenced music in even later songs.

Self-reflexivity, before being a necessary postmodernist feature, was just a natural extension of one's work: if writing songs is a very important part of life, how could it be possible not to question that very life within the songs? Ray Davies understood such need from early on and wrote songs questioning the social function of the songwriter and the role songs play in the environment they are consumed in. Self-reflexivity comes up as early as 1967 in Davies' songs, such as in "Wonder Boy"; songs become, from a point on, a way not only of reacting to life but also a way of negotiating life:

Wonder boy, some mother's son,  
Life is full of work and plunder.  
Easy go, life is not real,  
Life is only what you conjure.

"Life is full of work and plunder" since writing songs involves not only personal investment but also the use of references from other people's work. It is plunder working both ways, since Davies' songs are also material to plunder from. The main problem with Davies' approach lies in the convergence between songs and real life; the songs and the fame they bring forth diminish the scope on a supposed real life within a particular economical *milieu*: as a public figure, his life suffered a vast change. In a certain sense, the scenes he depicted did not arise from mere observation of the world he inhabited but rather were filtered through the character he assumed when writing. This originates an alternative world where not dealing with the aspects of life which allow for personal identification creates a cumbersome problem:

Sometimes when you write inside yourself you have no idea whether you are sane or not. When the rest of the world acknowledges your work, somehow they condone your insanity. In the case of "Wonder Boy," it felt that the people who bought the record had not understood my own little subtext. They were buying a Kinks record. To me it was a cry for help. Later, the full impact of what had happened hit me. (Davies, *X-Ray* 360)

One must wonder why someone would write a cry for help in the shape of a song that, in the end, does not sound like a cry for help. But for now what is relevant to note is the fact writing songs is a lonely task connected more to inner feelings than with an external view of the world. Freud's palliative measures towards the hard world come up again in Davies; nevertheless, while in MacColl the palliative measures were social and so collective, in Davies they are private and concern strictly the individual:

Then I went into the living room and wrote some song lyrics. I was not completely aware of what I was writing, and there was no poetic flow of any description, I was just using songs as a sort of therapy. I couldn't very well write songs about being an expectant father, but the events in my life were linked in some way to my songs. Anyone who says that creativity comes from divine inspiration is certainly wrong, particularly in my case. I wasn't writing songs for my wife, unborn child, God or country, I was writing to stay sane. (Davies, *X-Ray* 195)

The use of specific names meaningful to the author's life (such as Waterloo), a relevant part of writing songs, serves a particular purpose: to connect disjointed facts which take place in the real world. The therapeutic aspect of songwriting requires some sort of connection to the real world, which is, in turn, converted into wonder:

Wonder boy, some mother's son,  
Turn your sorrow into wonder;  
Dream alone, go have your fun.  
Life is only...  
Life is only/lonely...  
Life is only...

If life is converted into wonder in the songs, the adjective "wonder" becomes a fickle reference to the author's abilities: he is not the wonder boy as in the prodigious boy, he is just the man who turns his life into wonder, that is, into songs with catchy choruses and melodic instrumental sections. The end of the song plays with the similar sounding words "only" and "lonely," as one doubts which one is being sung. The openness left by the unfinished sentence "life is only..." is surprisingly closed by the instrumental conclusion—literally, life is only music; the play with the word "lonely" can be likewise ascribed to this position, and one can assume that a life filled only with music is a lonely life.

In *Muswell Hillbillies* (1971), The Kinks explicitly returned to American influences, merging them with what they had helped popularize as the English sound, a fusion that is obviously reflected in the title of the record, combining the name of a neighborhood in London with an American classification for people of a lower social status.<sup>17</sup> Although the sound is predominantly American, the inspiration for the themes is clearly English, as Davies admits in *Americana*: "Ironically, *Muswell Hillbillies* was inspired by London more than any other album we had recorded to date and much to our surprise the album received relatively good reviews in Britain particularly after the BBC had broadcast a

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<sup>17</sup> "The *Muswell Hillbillies* title itself was obviously a play on the American TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies*, about a hick family from the South that discovers oil and moves to a life of luxury in Beverly Hills. The naming of our album was no accident. The analogy was deliberate, but totally out of keeping with the rest of the English musical establishment at that time; while the mainstream British bands were breaking away from their roots, the Kinks were celebrating theirs" (Davies, *Americana* 98).

television special based on the album” (98). The first song, “20th Century Man,” marks the tone of disillusionment that we will find throughout the record right from the first stanza, marking a division with the pastoral landscapes marking earlier records:

This is the age of machinery,  
A mechanical nightmare,  
The wonderful world of technology,  
Napalm, hydrogen bombs, biological warfare.

The anger towards the twentieth century is more obvious if we consider the attack extends beyond technological transformations on the environment and deals directly with those transformations’ influence on art’s quality:

You keep all your smart modern writers  
Give me William Shakespeare  
You keep all your smart modern painters  
I’ll take Rembrandt, Titian, Da Vinci and Gainsborough.

As Larkin notes in “Going, Going,” art will be all that remains of England’s landscapes; and it is that Davies is referring to when, in “Last of the Steam Powered Trains” (*The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*, 1968), he says he lives in a museum: from memories to paintings, from musical references to stories and vague ideological notions on how things should be, all is lived in reference to things which no longer exist. His life has the peculiarity of having the artifacts from the past to linger on in the form of songs and it is the songs that tell the story of his life, not literally, most of the times, but always referentially (hence the two lives he has to juggle between).

It has already been mentioned how Davies’ autobiography is peculiar in the sense that it is built as a novel; the quest of the narrator, which makes him go back and meet the insufferable Ray Davies, is discovering the real identity of the girl Davies supposedly wrote many songs to and about: Julie Finkle, the girl’s name, is Davies’ own Rosebud. This narrative ploy is relevant, for Davies believes his career is divided in two parts: a first where he is manipulated by music executives into recording covers of popular American songs without much care for his own creative output (“You Really Got Me,” The Kinks’ first original hit and one of their most relevant songs, was, by Davies’ own accounts, a product of chance); in a second moment, Davies takes creative control over the band’s production and emerges as a songwriter. His first thought on being a singer and songwriter is described as an astonishing discovery about what songwriters usually do and what their lives and interests are:

Then there was music. Song-writing not only gave me an emotional outlet but might even be a means of earning a living. There was just one thing missing: how did a wretched art student living off a Middlesex grant in a suburb of north London find himself a fucking muse? I adored soccer, music and art. But somehow they all got confused. If my creativity had to rely on a winged messenger carrying divine inspiration to me across the mighty universe to my house in north London, he would have found my loyalties so muddled up that he would have probably had me playing outside-right for Manchester United carrying a sketch pad and a set of oil paints. (Davies, *X-Ray* 70)

Davies did not believe soccer, music, and art were the proper subjects to write songs about nor that they had any relation with one another; one of his main achievements might have been to understand that, since these subjects inform the interests of other human beings, they automatically turn into thematic material for songs. And this is where things really get interesting: Davies admits he has invented someone to write through and someone to write to; he did not create a pseudonym, although he did find a character he write songs through and, in a certain way, hide away the problems having to do with his real life:

The main problem was that I was not content to create just for myself. I had to do it for somebody. An audience. A Julie Finkle. I could draw my family and friends and turn them into characters that were not their own. Change their names and put different clothes on them. This was easy. But what and where and how would these people figure in music? Songs until now had been an outlet for my own confused sexuality and confinement in the society in which I lived. These songs were a hobby, a way of passing the time, and yet the songs appeared as if they were a lightning-rod from the Gods, yes Gods, the entities that floated around in the universe, gave life to animals and created the planet Earth. (Davies, *X-Ray* 71)

Writing things about oneself without any worry is regarded as a hobby while to procure such activity full time seems to impose a different approach; to understand oneself as a songwriter is to understand one's position in a society where songs circulate and where, on account of that, one must assume responsibility for what is said in them. It is the need to cope with that which leads the songwriter towards finding a comfortable character to absorb at least part of that responsibility.

Lionel Trilling ends his study on authenticity refusing as preposterous the idea authenticity is only achievable through a psychotic state, vulgarly "madness"; the idea society and its institutions work towards the alienation of character is unmanageable because one exists in relation to other human beings—there is no musical magic land where everyone is free from external influences:

Perhaps exactly because the thought is assented to so facilely, so without what used to be called seriousness, it might seem that no expression of disaffection from the social existence was ever so desperate as this eagerness to say that authenticity of personal being is achieved through an ultimate isolateness and through what this is presumed to bring. The falsities of an alienated social reality are

rejected in favour of an upward psychopathic mobility to the point of divinity, each one of us a Christ—but with none of the inconveniences of undertaking to intercede, of being a sacrifice, of reasoning with rabbis, of making sermons, of having disciples, of going to weddings and to funerals, of beginning something and at a certain point remarking that it is finished. (Trilling 171-2)

While Davies might complain about problems concerning social classes, and use songs to expose his position on social inequalities, he is not ready to refuse that real life works in that way; and while the name Julie Finkle might be made up, he clearly admits she is a real person: “You need to have an audience, to be connected with real human beings. There’s a Julie Finkle for everyone out there somewhere” (Davies, *X-Ray* 409-10). By creating a character to write through, characters to write about as well as to write to, he is not embarking on any kind of dishonesty; as he insists upon many times, he is attempting to keep his sanity, in a very literal way. It is his prerogative to do so, if we assume what Trilling says about each one of us being a Christ-like figure is correct: as a songwriter, Davies is constantly creating life. Julie Finkle is the character he made up to direct his conversations to: talking to oneself is one of the first signs of madness.<sup>18</sup> It is no wonder, then, that when Davies wrote a song that was a cry for help no one could understand—the problem was the person he was talking to and who could understand him could not answer his call for help for she had no palpable existence.

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<sup>18</sup> Creating a fictitious character to direct his songs to was also a way to deflect his responsibilities as a songwriter by imagining that the songs are only part of a conversation.

## Fast Cars

To say punk was a statement is such a common place one feels tempted to take it as an undeniable truth (or just to dismiss it altogether as a piece of meaningless talk). What kind of statement was it? Well, it depends on the conversation one is having: it was a musical statement, that seems obvious, but it could be described as a social, political, cultural, artistic, or even as a fashion statement, depending on the particular set of interests one has in mind. Of the many things said of punk, most have dealt with attempting to answer why these people were doing what they were doing. However, trying to explain why these bands were playing a certain kind of music, dressing in a particular way or behaving the way they did is much harder than it seems. Most answers to this question, particularly when speaking of English punk, come from an overview of 1976 and 1977, as if these years were the result of a program some people set out to accomplish, determined to introduce some significant changes to society. But as many other revolutionary movements in art, we must acknowledge punk as the result of a certain stroke of luck. The problem comes from two different approaches resulting in very different ideas on what punk was: on the one hand, there is the inflated view of punk, where the consequences punk had are established as the goal the first bands were aiming for, attributing the rise of the movement an *a priori* program it simply did not have; on the other hand, deflationary readings tend to assume punk was overrated and most of the media frenzy about some of the bands from those two golden years was simply an overexcited approach to mere copycats of more meaningful bands like the Velvet Underground, MC5, The Stooges (and Iggy Pop, mainly), or The New York Dolls, since tracing punk's history to its beginning always leads to these bands and the reverence they inspired in many people.

The divergences in punk history usually come from trying to explain the differences between American and English punk. The main difference, something most punk historians would agree on, was set by the more arty aspects of American punk, with its New York artistic aura, while English punk was always accompanied by what seemed like more political ideas. Careful historians will probably note that the arty aspect of punk should be emphasized and that on both sides of the Atlantic punk did draw the attention of the artistic circles. But the consequences of the movement are very often tangled up in the answer to the "why" question, and many mix up the consequences of certain events



with the reasons why those events took place. The “why” question is not, however, the main access to what punk was; there are two prior questions which seem more relevant: the “what” and the “how.” What were these people doing and how were they going about it?

The respectability of a punk history seems to be settled by an accurate account of who came first and who came later, mostly ignoring that the connections between facts are more unexpected than what is usually presumed; adding to this, the first person accounts of those who belong to that history, band members, producers, audiences and journalists, always seem determined to tone down the idea of punk as a program. In that sense, punk seems to be more a coincidence of incidents than a well-organized list of facts. Under these descriptions, the idea of punk as a statement is clearly declining. Yet, in some very important ways, punk was, indeed, a statement. To defend punk was a statement we do not need strong ideas about programs much less the idea that the notion of statement needs to be taken in a broad sense; when I say that punk was a statement, I am holding to the idea there was no particular program, and I am holding closer to the idea that statement can be taken in a very literal sense. This seems to pose a problem, for one would expect statements not to be sung or, at the very least, singing statements to be of little relevance: “It is ordinarily harmless to sing the words of statements or, at any rate, to hum them, since people are so careless and inattentive to the statements that are made when one is singing. Who cares about Jack and Jill in 2/4 time in middle C or in a boy soprano” (Bouwsma 248). The case for the normal sense in which people say punk is a statement derives from a particular attention to the words sung by punk bands; the dismissal of such a position comes from the attempt to say sung statements are not as relevant as spoken statements. In these two positions we have the modes people normally approach punk.

I do not want to attack any particular position, and I surely do not want to say a middle ground position is the right place to be in. What I want to say is punk was a statement in more ways than the ones normally accounted for; this includes singing statements as well as performing statements. The point I am trying to make is clearly put by Peter Geach: “There is, to my mind, no ground whatsoever for supposing that different kinds of statement have different kinds of truth; truth is just truth” (223). It would seem that behind my position is an idea about intentions accounting for my notion of statement; indeed, intentions have a very important role in saying punk was a statement since, again as Geach best puts it, it is not clear if saying things is more factual

than having intentions: “I cannot here discuss the nature of intention; it is at least not immediately obvious that we ought to reject the dictum of an English judge about intention—that the state of a man’s mind is as much a fact as the state of his digestion” (226). O. K. Bouwsma, previously quoted, does not seem to believe this is true, for when answering the question “Are Poems Statements?” he inserts a paragraph, which works as a kind of cautionary note to his essay, clarifying that statements of intentions cannot be accounted for as being true or false: “Someone may have noticed that I did not consider the remote possibility that someone who said that poems are statements meant to say that poems are statements of intentions. These, too, are statements, but are neither true nor false” (250). This is the kind of position Geach is openly attacking by saying that there cannot be different kinds of truth and, particularly, as “the identity of a proposition is not the identity of a string of words” (221), so the identity of a statement is not connected to particular kinds of special sentences: statements can be put forward by more than words.

An example of what I consider to be a statement is the body of work by The Talking Heads, according to this description by David Byrne:

In most rock & roll there’s the emphasis on the front person, or group of front people, on the stage living out this mythical archetype. They are given this role that they become possessed by and they live out that role in front of the audience... The basic consciousness [of our music] is quite different... We decided we wouldn’t do guitar solos or drum solos, and we wouldn’t make any grand gestures. We’d try and be very to the point. We were throwing out what we didn’t want to be. It wasn’t until we’d been performing for quite a while that we started to realize what we were. (Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* 212)

Under this description, every song by The Talking Heads is a statement, outside the particular set of verbal statements made in each song. In the same way, a punk band using more than three chords might be making a statement, much in the way using two or three chords to make a song was a statement in the beginning of punk. One might still argue about the possibility of giving true or false value to such statements, but that would require a long discussion about whether it is possible to consider such statements as insulated from other kind of statements. As Geach points out in his essay, the possibility of attaching a true or false value to certain statements must not be detached from the actions human beings perform; to describe human beings requires that one takes into account many kinds of statements.

Notably, punk does not stand as an easy subject if one wants to dismiss the idea of a program altogether; even when one is not asking why things were done in a certain

way but rather asking what was being done, the idea of a program comes back to haunt us. The history of a band like the Buzzcocks might serve as an example of this difficulty. Howard Devoto and Pete Shelley had changed their names<sup>19</sup> and formed the band after watching the Sex Pistols perform and were, in fact, the two minds responsible for taking the Pistols to play at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester, in the famous concert where most of the few members of the audience were to become well-known personalities in the history of modern music. Devoto, always described as the intellectual of the band, left soon after the release of the Buzzcocks first EP, *Spiral Scratch*, in January 1977. *Spiral Scratch* was the first do-it-yourself release of English punk, and the way it was made became a statement on its own. When Devoto left, pursuing his more artistic vein to form Magazine, Shelley took over as the front man of the Buzzcocks and it was under his leadership the band released their first album, *Another Music in a Different Kitchen* (1978). The first song of that album, “Fast Cars,” is a very difficult object to analyze in light of what has been, so far, said. It is a fast pop song, something the Buzzcocks would become known for, but it seems to enclose the kind of political statement that would be associated with punk:

Sooner or later, you're gonna listen to Ralph Nader.  
I don't wanna cause a fuss, but fast cars are so dangerous.  
Fast cars, fast cars.  
Fast cars, I hate fast cars, fast cars.  
Fat cars, fast cars,  
I hate fast cars.

The direct political reference in the lyrics seems to highlight the song as a political statement, diminishing what seems to be the greatest statement made by the piece, a pop song played in a different tempo from the one expected in a pop song. To understand this, one must look at punk, and at this point particularly at English punk, as special. As has been said, the difference between American punk and English punk seems to be defined by the latter being more socially concerned while the former was more artistically related; however, the big difference between the two kinds of punk is much simpler to describe: what sets English punk apart from all other forms of punk is the Sex Pistols. The golden years of English punk, 1976 and 1977, had no program behind them; they were the result of a circumstance Peter Hook described in a very precise way:

We decided to follow the rules of punk...

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<sup>19</sup> Their real names were Howard Trafford and Pete McNeish.

Rule one: act like the Sex Pistols.

Rule two: look like the Sex Pistols. One guitar, one bass. (39)

A generation of teenagers heard the Sex Pistols and was drawn to emulate them. Although this seems a way of downgrading what happened in England during those years, as if nothing more than dumbness was driving the bands formed under these two rules, this is a good description of what drew some very remarkable people to music and, in a very broad sense, to art. Jon Savage describes it as a religious conversion: “To most of their small audiences, their music was just scraping and gnawing sounds, but at each concert, one or two people listened and, instantly converted, laid aside their previous lives to follow them” (143). Among the people who followed these rules were some intellectuals thriving in different fields, whether in music, photography, design, cinema, journalism or literature; and in no way did these people fall short of their arty American counterparts which grew up without Hook’s two basic rules.<sup>20</sup>

In a very strange sense, “Fast Cars” is the result of a mistake interpreting the Sex Pistols. When the Sex Pistols were caught live on television, in 1976, during the *Today* show, attacking the host Bill Grundy, himself admittedly drunk during the interview, with very harsh language the press brought music to its front pages, introducing a political connotation to the band it really did not have. The attacks on Grundy were mostly retaliation for a sexist comment he made to Siouxsie, at the time just a member of the band’s entourage, and would have little impact were it not for the front cover pages of the tabloids the next day (*The Daily Mirror*’s “The Filth and the Fury” was the most famous of those front covers); Savage understands the shift from the entertainment pages to the front page put a different stress on punk, turning it into something assumedly political: “The impact of punk on the news, instead of on the entertainment pages, made it possible to sing about anything—except love. Singing about love only reinforced pop’s ‘private’ status in society: Punk was public, determinedly in the world” (295). The commotion was further extended by the Pistols release of *Never Mind the Bollocks* (October 1977), and the pressure exerted by the media on songs like “God Save the Queen” or “Anarchy in the U.K.” made the Pistols look like political activists when in fact they were nothing close to that.

The Sex Pistols were a product of Malcolm McLaren’s mind, a kind of boy band, and the idea there was a program to follow might arise from that point; but McLaren’s

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<sup>20</sup> As noted about a remark made by Richard Hell on changing his way of playing to approach the Pistols’ style of playing, the Pistols’ influence on American music seems more elusive.

program was mainly aesthetic and, for those who first heard the band, that plan was far from obvious or relevant, even after McLaren's failed attempt to renew The New York Dolls. Beyond McLaren's suspicious plots for grandeur, the plan to follow was the idea people could be on stage, performing, without being particularly good at whatever position they held on that stage, and this idea was not even brought up by the music itself, or by the content of the lyrics, but by the people forming the band:

No. What made them special, without a shadow of a doubt, was Johnny Rotten. The tunes were just a part of the package—and probably the least important part of it, if I'm honest. Close your eyes and like I say you had a conventional pub-rock band with a soundman who either didn't have a clue or was being very clever indeed. But who was going to close their eyes when he, Johnny Rotten, was standing there? Sneering and snarling at you, looking at you like he hated you, hated being there, hated everyone. What he embodied was the *attitude* of the Pistols, the attitude of punk. Through him they expressed what we wanted to express, which was complete nihilism. You know the way you feel when you're a teenager, all that confusion about the future that turns to arrogance and then rebellion, like, 'Fuck off, we don't fucking care, we're shit, we don't care'? He had all of that and more. (Hook 38)

For all that could be said about the rebellion against institutional power, whether political or musical, there would be no manifesto or political program that could, in such a short period of time, change so much. The media frenzy rapidly surrounding the Sex Pistols was doing more than the band itself for spreading the word; if the audiences watching the concerts were being converted, as Hook claims he and "Barney and Terry were being converted" at the Lesser Free Trade Hall (38), following Savage's own proposition, the media was making sure the rest of the world would be converted too. As Ian Curtis, Joy Division's lead singer, put it: "I can see the point of interviews. People want to know why things are made the way they are. If they buy a new car, they want to know how it works. Why does it do this? Why can this car go faster than this car? Why does it look better than that one?" (157). People needed to know what was the phenomenon causing so much agitation, while the interviews and album reviews added up to the frenzy by stating things that were not accurate. Most band members, misinterpreting the Pistols, created the idea of a unified struggle against institutionalized power, when most bands were only complaining about not having money to record their songs.

The Buzzcocks had beaten their heroes by releasing their first EP months before the Pistols released their first album, after Shelley borrowed the money needed for the recording from his father; they had, however, learned their lessons well and songs like "Boredom":

Yeah, well, I say what I mean,  
I say what comes to my mind.  
I never get around to things,

I live a straight, straight line.  
You know me, I'm acting dumb,  
You know the scene, very humdrum.  
Boredom, boredom.

seem to emulate the aesthetical statement songs like the Pistols' "Seventeen" seemed to be asserting:

We like noise, it's our choice,  
It's what we wanna do.  
We don't care about long hair,  
I don't wear flares.  
See my face, not a trace  
No reality.  
I don't work,  
I just speed  
That's all I need.  
I'm a lazy sod.

Note it is easy to get political meanings out of both examples, but what I want to underline is the shift the Buzzcocks underwent from their first EP to their first album, a change reflecting Devoto's departure, naturally, but also what had happened to the Pistols after the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks*. The political charge around English punk was a consequence of people trying to emulate the Pistols and, from a certain point, mimicking the Pistols was just about getting the same kind of media attention surrounding them. Media gave the Pistols a position they were not expecting to have, representing a whole generation: when Rotten said "I" it was like turning the royal "we" into the singular; a generation believed the Pistols stood for them, that they incorporated certain ideals which needed defending. Suddenly, punk was not just about challenging aesthetics or musical forms, it was about an undefined "us" against an even more indefinable "them." By that time, turning songs into personal political positions seemed a fair price to pay to get to where the Pistols were, until the moment came when it had to be acknowledged that falling in love with a band is similar to falling in love with another human being; sometimes one falls in love with someone one should not have fallen in love with and that has to be sung too.

## Change of Speed

The previous argument on punk is useful to understand the place Joy Division came from; the Buzzcocks were the most important band in Manchester when the members of Joy Division first came together, precisely in the aftermath of that famous show of the Sex Pistols in the Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Joy Division formed with one sole goal: to be like the Sex Pistols. Before changing their name to Joy Division, they started out as Warsaw, after a David Bowie song from *Low* (1977), and there was no plan but to follow Peter Hook's rules about punk. For a while that was exactly what they did, copying the formula the Sex Pistols had set for punk and with Ian Curtis trying to understand how to say similar things to what other bands, also emulating the Pistols, were saying. For the first year of the band, and in the first recordings the band did, it is very easy to understand the kinship between Warsaw and the bands sprouting up around the Pistols. Yet, this band already had a distinct temperament not allowing for them to stand shoulder to shoulder with the other punk bands; the bass was too prominent, the drums too complex, and the guitar, under this arrangement, just seemed to disappear. Curtis' voice and lyrics did not have the strength, clarity, and distinctiveness which set bands like the Buzzcocks or the Damned apart from lesser-known bands. The failure of Warsaw as a punk band was partly set on a mixture between an inability to dominate each particular instrument and a misconception about what punk was—a misconception, I must once more underline, most bands from this period suffered from and that in no way undermines their particular achievements.

During the Warsaw years, Ian Curtis' writing was very similar to what the Buzzcocks did after Devoto's departure; it was about an "us" against a "them," it had to do with "the failure of Modern Man,"<sup>21</sup> it included attacks on institutions like the army ("Walked in Line"), it mentioned the numbness of watching TV ("Exercise One"), and it had all the frustration one would expect to encounter in a proper punk band. Even the notion of provocation was part of the band, as many Nazi references kept popping up without anyone being able to really pinpoint where it all came from if not from a teenage will to cause agitation (even when the band started to evolve, changing their name, they still chose a name, Joy Division, connected to the Nazi landscape—a reference having more to do with reading books than with believing in anything connected to Nazi

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<sup>21</sup> A line from "Failures."

ideology<sup>22</sup>). Along these lines, there were already some hints Curtis was a different kind of writer and his failing at punk revealed only that was not his natural ground. The problem, as the Pistols' road manager Nils Stevenson admits to Savage, was a misconception about the Pistols' true abilities: "What was wrong with the Pistols was that they were too good for their purpose. John's lyrics were incredible, for instance. The group became the style of the time because they were so good: instead of demystifying it and showing that anyone could do it, they proved that anyone couldn't" (285). When the Pistols addressed abortion, they sang "Bodies"; when Curtis addressed similar issues he crooned on "No Love Lost," using a quote from *House of Dolls* and changing the word "vagina" for "body": "Through the wire screen, the eyes of those standing outside looked in at her as into the cage of some rare creature in a zoo. In the hand of one of the assistants she saw the same instrument which they had that morning inserted deep into her body. She shuddered instinctively." And it was not just a question of how the lyrics had different qualities, it had to do with an attitude Joy Division never had and that Savage perfectly captures in his description of the Pistols' "Bodies":

The only all-new song is "Bodies," put together in the studio. Announced by the usual Cook/Jones fanfare, John Lyndon starts his story, sparked by a fan letter: "She was a girl from Birmingham / She just had an abortion..." There is no tune, just relentless punk, as Lyndon enters into insanity. Like many of his songs from this period, "Bodies" has no fixed narrator, being told in both third and first person; it has an almost schizoid viewpoint. (Savage 415)

The lines quoted from "No Love Lost" were spoken in a very articulated manner, contrasting with the aggression in the Pistols' approach. Curtis' sensitive writing was more centered on the private aspects of society, and it did not fit in with punk's stress on the public; propelled by Curtis' evolution as a songwriter Joy Division would, in a very short time span, change their music in order to keep up with the sensitivity in Curtis' lyrics.

Paul Morley has noted that in all of Joy Division's recordings they never sang the word 'baby'. This was part, no doubt, of the kind of statements most bands formed during the punk era made, something close to the setting of a rule for not using solos in a song. But one must also note the band, while keeping to this punk statement, developed quickly from a punk sound to something completely different. Anyone speaking of Joy Division will note that their first recordings, when they were still known

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<sup>22</sup> The band took their name from a novella, *House of Dolls*, by Ka-tzetnik, dealing with special units in Nazi concentration camps—Joy Divisions—where women were kept to sexually please German soldiers and cooperative prisoners.



as Warsaw, were wanting when compared to what other punk bands were doing at the time. In fact, while fans might not want to take it for granted, Warsaw was just not good enough. This changed when their first album, *Unknown Pleasures* (1978), was released; the album had a cohesive sound although it was still a compilation of songs mixing some clearly in tone with their punk beginning while adding others of a different sort. The apparent cohesion of the record is majorly set by Martin Hannett's production, which introduced an overall sense of consistency the songs, by themselves, did not have. What I want to stress out in the next few pages is how this is connected with Ian Curtis' evolution as a songwriter, how the themes Curtis writes about required a different kind of music and how the relationship between band members is essential to understand the elegance of what Joy Division did.

In 1978, under the strong influence of punk, to sing a line like "I took the blame," as Curtis did in "New Dawn Fades," was a very strong statement; it marked a move away from certain themes punk had deemed necessary in order for songs and bands to be classified as punk. It changed the idea the "I" in punk was meant to encircle a "we" and, with that shift, the individual was put up front. Maybe the best description of what happened to punk after 1977 is contained in the opening line of that song: "A change of speed, a change of style." If punk was a statement, the mere changing of the speed of the music made by the bands that existed around punk must be seen as a statement. But if punk, with all its strength, can hardly be thought of as the result of a program, what has been called post-punk (or new wave) is even more elusive. The idea the progression from punk to what follows is, in some way, programmatically sketched is very naive. Curtis' description in "New Dawn Fades" goes straight to the point:

A change of speed, a change of style.  
A change of scene, with no regrets,  
A chance to watch, admire the distance,  
Still occupied, though you forget.  
Different colours, different shades,  
Over each mistakes were made.  
I took the blame.  
Directionless so plain to see,  
A loaded gun won't set you free.  
So you say.

Very plainly, this is the description of Joy Division's evolution from the early years as Warsaw to the band which recorded *Unknown Pleasures*; it is also the description of the fading of the new dawn punk symbolized. Peter Hook openly says the song comes out too slow in the album version, that the band sounded different live (74); it had more

energy and strength, both toned down by Hannett's production in order to match Curtis' lyrics. What is relevant, if one sees these lines as a description of what is going on with the music, is the notion this was not an intellectual movement, not an attempt to counterbalance the ideology of punk; it was a necessary move in order to write about something different. The keynote in this reflexive description of what Joy Division was doing is the idea of "directionless."

The description made in this song, a description made through the lyrics but also through the change in the tempo of the music, marks the shift in Curtis' way of writing. Taking into account Peter Hook's descriptions of the way songs were made by the band and the major role Curtis played in the process, what one must understand is the shift in the writing process of the lyrics must be in accordance with the kind of music the lyrics are set to:

Back then we didn't know rules or theory. We had our ear, Ian, who listened and picked out the melodies. Then at some point his lyrics would appear. He always had these scraps of paper that he'd written things down on and he'd go through his plastic bag. "Oh, I've got something that might suit that." And the next thing you knew he'd be standing there with a piece of paper in one hand, wrapped around the microphone stand, with his head down, making the melodies work. (Hook 141)

In a way, it is as if the speed which distinguished punk music from other kinds of music could not be used for certain kind of subjects; in this sense, punk could not be used in discussing the individual by itself, only the individual as a figure for youth—punk did not allow for a distance from which to admire, punk was about being engaged in a struggle (whatever that struggle might be).

The particular beauty of this song lies in the way it describes the band's position towards the musical scene they were set in, while it maintains a note of a very selfish description of Curtis' position as a songwriter. The description allows for the musical reading only in the sense the musical change it describes coincides with Curtis' change. But then what is Curtis describing here? He is describing that writing needs subjects and, in a very general way, there are no possible subjects without the presence of the author in them. Take the line "A loaded gun won't set you free" as an example; Curtis' suicide in 1980 has turned this line (as it has done to many others) into a hint at the event, but the stress here is openly different. A loaded gun can set one free in a different sense in this song, and one must look at the line without the particular *innuendos* arising from the biographical knowledge one has about Ian Curtis. A loaded gun sets one free in the sense it allows one to write, it is a subject from which, and of which, to write; and it is even more relevant because it allows for a distance between the singer and the subject, since

one does not expect Curtis to be really the character in a song portraying a killer. Curtis was realizing using characters in songs did not fit him as a writer. It required a need for empathy which was outside his scope, and it had a mark of fakeness to it hard to deal with. As he would sing in “Shadowplay,” acting out one’s own death was a deed made by someone “knowing no more,” by someone who felt his abilities as a writer allowed for nothing more than to take on the role of characters who kill or are killed.

In a later song, “These Days,” Curtis will sing the lines: “Spent all my time, learnt a killer’s art. / Took threats and abuse ’till I’d learned the part.” If my intuition about how a loaded gun can set one free holds, then in these lines Curtis is commenting on his own education as a writer; the killer’s art refers to his position as a writer, singing on stage about guns, hitmans, and killers, during the band’s existence as Warsaw. From there to the position of the man writing the songs in *Unknown Pleasures* there is a gap, since what happens in the album is exactly the collapse between character and writer. Stephen Morris, the drummer, commented on Curtis’ writing for this album, where he felt he was writing from a third person point of view:

On *Unknown Pleasures*, I think that what Ian was doing was assuming characters, and he was writing from someone else’s point of view. From what I could gather, he was writing from another perspective. I felt at the time that he was doing the same on *Closer*—it’s only in hindsight you realise that that’s not necessarily the case. It wasn’t a character he was writing about anymore. It was all about him and his life. (Morley 135)

This view might come from the fact some of the songs in *Unknown Pleasures* are still from the beginning of the band, they still have a very punk feel to them. But it also might come from the fact that for a short period of time Curtis was able to find equilibrium in his writing—the crisis in his life was yet to come.

“She’s Lost Control” and “Transmission” are the two most obvious examples of the balance Curtis found in his new position as a writer, examples marking the progression from punk to the mature sound Joy Division would be known for. Peter Hook, discussing the recording of “She’s Lost Control,” says:

Ian was apparently moved to write this lyric after an incident at work. It’s about an epileptic young lady who was having problems finding and keeping a job, who eventually died while fitting. That must have been terrifying for him. The first I knew of that was when Bernard mentioned it on a Joy Division documentary. Again, I wasn’t paying much attention to the lyrics. [...] There’s no analysis going on. Nobody was going, “Let’s have a look at your lyrics, Ian. Let’s have a talk about them. Let’s dissect the lyric.” He probably would have just gone mad and told you to fuck off. He delivered his vocals with the perfect amount of passion and spirit, exactly what we wanted. Saying that, reading the lyrics now, his use of repetition and onomatopoeic delivery is startling. (Hook 204-5)

Hook is not the best person to look to when it comes to explaining Joy Division's lyrics since he openly admits to never having paid much attention to them; but there is something relevant in the fact that for some of the lyrics there seems to be no point in trying to find an explanation that fits them. In this case, as in the case of "Transmission," the irrelevance of discussing what is being sung stems from the balance Curtis found in his writing—while he is clearly addressing his own life, nothing particularly relevant seems to come out of it. *Closer* would change this, of course, but it is relevant to understand where the lyrics of that second album come from and the argument I am trying to make is they come from here, from this shift in the way of writing.

The song clearly displaying Curtis' change in the way he wrote songs is "Shadowplay." The title is significant to what will be Curtis' position as a songwriter, although at this moment it might not yet seem completely clear. What marks this as the changing point is the idea that as a songwriter, and as the front man of a band, Curtis is playing a game of shadows, where he has to assume and deal with two different roles; in a sense, he goes up on stage to act out his own death while off-stage real life goes on. To play the assassin in a song is a way to separate the singer from real life but at a certain point the two different existences collapse—either because they are similar or because they are too far apart. The song describes the difficulty in dealing with these two realities and one must note the change in the assassin's position; while in the song "The Kill" the assassin was on the stage, in this song the assassins are dancing on the floor:

In the shadowplay, acting out your own death, knowing no more,  
As the assassins all grouped in four lines, dancing on the floor,  
And with cold steel, odour on their bodies made a move to connect,  
But I could only stare in disbelief as the crowds all left.

I did everything, everything I wanted to,  
I let them use you for their own ends,  
To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you,  
To the centre of the city in the night, waiting for you.

While in the Warsaw songs Curtis assumed the position of the assassin as an easy subject to write on, the evolution of his writing and of the band led to a change in the characters' positions. The four rows of assassins dancing are a reference to an audience in a typical Joy Division concert; it is that crowd that now takes the place of the assassin, a position marked by their constant demand for more. The move to connect, to establish a relationship with this crowd naturally fades, leaving the writer alone in his own world. So alone, in fact, he is left with no way out except to talk to himself: "Shadowplay" is

nothing more than a man talking to himself and the chorus of the song must be looked at in relation with the closing lines of “New Dawn Fades”:

Oh, I've walked on water, run through fire  
Can't seem to feel it anymore.  
It was me, waiting for me  
Hoping for something more  
Me, seeing me this time, hoping for something else.

The inability to walk on water or run through fire develops from an inability to feel, an inability that shows the incapacity to take on roles to write from; the ability to perform deeds as those of the first line seems to require a capacity for empathy and so, one might say, finding his own self means fantasy is no longer possible. It is a movement described by the refrain in “Shadowplay” and most obviously by the opening stanza of that song:

To the centre of the city where all roads meet, waiting for you,  
To the depths of the ocean where all hopes sank, searching for you,  
I was moving through the silence without motion, waiting for you,  
In a room with a window in the corner I found truth.

The discrepancy between the first two lines, in the sense they seem to belong to two different realms, is closely related to the idea one can walk on water and run through fire; to find truth in a room is a description of how it is by writing this author finds the position to write from, and moving through the silence without motion is just a refined way of describing the writing itself. Curtis is searching for himself, alone, waiting for nothing more than a comfortable position to write from; the “you” he waits and searches for is himself, exactly as in “New Dawn Fades” he sings: “It was me, waiting for me.” Having this in mind, Peter Hook’s short comment on Curtis’ abilities as a lyricist seem perfectly in tune with what was happening: “His songs from that point [the recording of *An Ideal for Living*] were like having a conversation with a genius, sort of profound and impenetrable at the same time” (75).

Having understood the position to write from, Curtis developed his lyrics quickly into constructions different from punk’s in the sense there was no longer the need to be bluntly obvious about what was being said; the “I” referring to a plural community summarized its private connotation. The gracefulness in Curtis’ writing when he was still trying to emulate the Pistols was no longer a problem; on the contrary, it was progressively emphasized until it reached a new level in *Closer*, where that gracefulness reaches points of excruciating self-reference. Deborah Curtis, describing Curtis’ last

conversation with Tony Wilson, addresses the point: “They discussed what Tony considered to be Ian’s tendency to use ‘archaic English and nineteenth-century grammatical constructions.’ Talking like two elderly scholars was one way of avoiding the real-life issue. Perhaps this helped to take Ian’s mind off his personal problems, but the climax to the scenario could only be postponed, not cancelled altogether” (126). Changing positions means adjusting the language and understanding that saying things does not require bluntness, as punk asked for, putting Curtis’ lyrics closer to what one could call poetry. Wilson’s attention to this change is indeed remarkable in that sense, and it is another point against the idea singing words means nothing, even when those words involve a not-so-direct approach as in punk. It is also relevant to understand that writing lyrics with more far-fetched language is not in the same category as writing songs where characters walk on water or run through fire: what seems awkward is the idea that as long as one was assuming characters when writing, language could be clear and precise about such extraordinary features as walking on water and running through fire, while when writing in the first person suddenly requires a hazy language, filled with archaisms and strange semantic constructions, as if hiding things were more relevant than clarifying them.

## The Killer's Art

While *Unknown Pleasures* seems a collection of songs where the traits of punk can still be felt, *Closer* is a much more cohesive work. Much of the shock the other band members felt when they listened to the first album seemed gone by the time *Closer* was made, although they still felt Hannett's production removed the strength of their sound. Bernard Sumner, particularly, seems reluctant to this day to accept the album represents the true Joy Division:

We just wanted something that sounded better than *Unknown Pleasures*. Closer to our target. I didn't get *Unknown Pleasures*. I thought, I'd better get it, because this is our LP, but it was just a mystery to me. It's the same with *Closer*—it's become a classic, but I'm still regretting that it didn't get close enough to what I wanted. I'm on the inside, I know what it was like to stand on stage and feel that power. It didn't get close to capturing that power. Perhaps it got close to liberating some other kind of power—something emotional, something introspective. (Morley 126)

Sumner looks at the work done for the album only in musical terms; he does not feel the sound he worked on live is captured in the studio work, and it seems it was so in both albums. Hannett's production in *Unknown Pleasures* had, in a way, worked towards the introduction of a certain cohesion in a list of songs which had different musical ranges; but with *Closer*, cohesion was not the prevailing concern. Stephen Morris, for instance, speaks of the band, particularly Curtis, as being completely aware of that cohesion and of the need to reinforce it:

"Love Will Tear Us Apart" didn't fit on the album even though it came from the same session, and not just because of the lyrics. It was a pop song, and *Closer* seemed a cohesive album that fitted together rather than a collection of songs. "Love Will Tear Us Apart" would have stuck out like a sore thumb. We were very stubborn about the things we believed in. Ian was very stubborn. There was never a question of changing things to make things easier. (Morley 140)

It seems obvious, from the musicians' perspective, the musical aspects are central, explaining their blindness towards the thematic nature of the songs in *Closer*; but that is not the only reason which made them unable to grasp the lyrical implications of the songs, it was also the fact the construction of the album as an organized whole was working exclusively in two minds: Ian Curtis' and Martin Hannett's. Hook's comment on the producer's work becomes, from this point of view, clearer: "We were wrong, I think, about what Martin was doing. He was making sense of what we were doing without us really knowing that's what he was doing" (Morley 129).

Hook's position, as Sumner's and Morris', is then a peculiar one: the producer was working on songs and understanding them before and better than the band (Curtis aside, from what the other members remember). He was trying to make them sound, in Hook's rendition of Hannett's words, "like adult gothic music" (248). Hannett's special understanding of Joy Division did not come only from a particular feeling within the music, which seems to have been different from the final result of the album, but it must have come also from a special understanding of the lyrics. The hint at the gothic feeling is accurate in the sense *Closer's* songs benefit from an evolution in Curtis' writing which allowed him to write in a different way from the one he had been using so far. The shift in the semantic fields of the lyrics was a shift towards something owing much to the nineteenth century English poetry, as Tony Wilson so perceptively noted. To make the music fit the lyrics the way Hannett did is a demonstration of his genius, a geniality Tony Wilson was very willingly able to emphasize when retelling the history of his record company, Factory. *Closer* has been, since Curtis' suicide, overflowing with dark senses about the intentions of the singer, dark senses Hannett wanted to give the right music to go along with. The album had not yet been released when Curtis ended his life, and so, before it publicly existed, it already had a special aura surrounding it. Its cover, a photograph of a tomb in Genoa, would enhance that aura although the band members, Curtis included, had chosen the photograph two months before the suicide. All of this had an important effect in the way people perceived the album, constantly picking out different clues to what was being said. The publication, in 1995, of *Touching from a Distance*, a biography of Curtis written by his widow, Deborah Curtis, would enhance the pressure already put into the album; the evidences of Curtis' depression, the pressure of marriage and fatherhood, and the love affair with Annik Honoré, suddenly seemed completely obvious to the world and the question in order concerned the passivity of everyone involved in the recording of the album: did no one hear what was going through Curtis' mind? As they explain their frustration with the album's sound, it seems clear few people were really listening to anything beyond the music, an important point about the different ways in which people relate to music.

Most answers to the question why nothing was done about Curtis' depression embrace some sort of naiveté, as seen by the band members' appeal to the idea they were only concerned with the music. What all answers seem to signal, even when it is not stated directly, is encapsulated in a particular word: hindsight. It is not necessary to go into every quotation about the problem of *Closer* being plainly obvious in hindsight,



except perhaps to quote Deborah Curtis, who had no place in the recording sessions and only heard the record after her husband's death:

The release of *Closer* brought with it a burst of realization for many of those already close to Ian. His intentions and feelings were all there within the lyrics. While he lived they were equivocal, but with hindsight all was disclosed when it was too late for anything to be done. Such a sensitive composition could not have happened by accident. For me, *Closer* was Ian's valediction and Joy Division's finest work. (Curtis 139)

What is being said here, contrary to other positions hinted in *Touching From a Distance*, is there really was nothing that could have been done. Although Deborah Curtis says she, had she heard the record before the suicide, might have understood what was going on and act upon it, the bottom line is that only in hindsight could some things be understood. As long as Ian Curtis was alive, the lyrics he sang in *Closer* could only be equivocal hints at something. Nonetheless, this seems peculiar: what's being proposed is that a man writes some lyrics where, apparently, he directly states he is thinking about suicide and only after his suicide does it become clear he was thinking about it. The eccentricity of this assumption is no one disputes the clarity of what is being said in the lyrics, no one argues what is being said might not be so obvious as some believe. I am not saying it should be claimed Curtis is not addressing suicide, or his depression, but I am openly stating there is more to it than that, and the true artistic value of *Closer* lies beyond that hindsight look. What I am suggesting is the biographical events everyone sees and understands in the songs of the album have been posing a barrier to understanding what the album is truly about.

The argument is not that biography is irrelevant or that understanding obvious things in hindsight is in any way negative or unimportant; I can honestly say I only understood this album after reading *Touching From a Distance*. *Closer* is, nonetheless, relevant in other ways and, as Joy Division's first album marked a change in the way of writing lyrics and songs, the second album substantiates those changes. Understanding this aspect of what happens in *Closer* requires one go beyond the ways Curtis' personal life helps to deal with some of the more elusive lyrics; lines like "No family life, this makes me feel uneasy," or "This is the crisis I knew had to come / Destroying the balance I'd kept," are part of an idea of how Curtis' personal problems pass on to his songs. But within the work of someone who was clearly changing his language and his ways of thinking, what goes on in this album is much more elusive. Take the last stanza from "A Means to an End":

A house somewhere on foreign soil,  
Where ageing lovers call.  
Is this your goal, your final needs,  
Where dogs and vultures eat?  
Committed still I turn to go.

What seems a mere rhetorical process, an association of words built more for its awkwardness than for its meaning, gains a different feel when one knows about the affair with Annik Honoré, Curtis' Belgian mistress who took obvious relevance in the last months of his life. With this information, the lines from the song acquire a different significance and while it seems there are some lines of mere rhetorical fancy ("Where dogs and vultures eat"), the meaning of "foreign" is associated with Annik and this settles some of the apparent impenetrability of the lines; it seems as if this were a wish for the future, something to look for with Annik. Examples as this abound in the album, but even if quoted thoroughly, they would say little about it; that is why I want to focus my attention on the idea the album was built as a whole, that Curtis and Hannett had something on their minds when they set out to arrange the album the way they did.

One of the first surprising things about *Closer* is the strange symmetry between the first song, "Atrocity Exhibition," and the last song, "Decades": the first invites to get inside, while the last starts with an effort to get in. The invitation to get inside refers to getting inside asylums, while in "Decades" the effort to get inside refers to getting inside Hell ("Hell's darker chamber"). In a certain sense, which I will try to explain, asylums and Hell stand for the same and the differences in the access are related to different perspectives. Kim Gordon, bassist and vocalist of the American band Sonic Youth, wrote, in the early 1980s, about how being a performer brought consequences on one's identity; the idea behind the sacrifice she sees in performing relates to the peculiarity of having "people pay to see others believe in themselves" (50). Gordon develops the idea of performing as a kind of sacrifice:

As a performer you sacrifice yourself, you go through the motions and emotions of sexuality for all the people who pay to see it, to believe that it exists. The better and more convincing the performance, the more an audience can identify with the exterior involved in such an expenditure of energy. Performers appear to be submitting to the audience, but in the process they gain control of the audience's emotions. They begin to dominate the situation through the awe inspired by their total submission to it. Someone who works hard at his or her job is not going to become a "hero," but may make just enough money to be able to afford to be liberated temporarily through entertainment. A performer, however, as the hero, will be paid for being sexually uncontrolled, but will still be at the mercy of the clubs and of the way the media shapes identity. How long can someone continue to exert intensity before it becomes mannered and dishonest? (Gordon 50-1)

Much of what goes on in *Closer* has to do with this anxiety about performing and turning something personal into something public, a problem more palpable when it comes to Curtis due to his epilepsy, a condition which put a lot of strain in the band's live act. Disease is actually an important part of *Closer*. Lines like "A hint of anesthesia" or "Gotta find some therapy, this treatment takes too long" are sung with particular emphasis and make it significant to note the relevance of the invitation to get inside an asylum; in an album where the references to pain, suffering and hurting are so pervasive the invitation seems to imply literal asylums. Yet, in the first stanza of "Atrocity Exhibition," the description of the asylums seems analogous with the description of a concert:

Asylums with doors open wide,  
Where people had paid to see inside,  
For entertainment they watch his body twist,  
Behind his eyes he says, "I still exist."

The second stanza emphasizes the description of a concert, this time in reference to arenas; the point continues to be to underline the lunacy in certain human activities one pays to gain entrance to. In Curtis' case, the apparent lunacy of making a show out of someone's suffering, of paying to watch a man suffer, refers to the fact songs now have a personal connotation to them and as so are built from his suffering; the second stanza, then, still depicts a Joy Division concert:

In arenas he kills for a prize,  
Wins a minute to add to his life.  
But the sickness is drowned by cries for more,  
Pray to God, make it quick, watch him fall.

Understanding these lines requires knowledge of some biographical notes, particularly of the frantic way Curtis danced and of his epilepsy diagnosis which led him to several blackouts during concerts: the fall, in the second stanza, is a literal fall. In any case, biography is not completely crucial. Having in mind the lines from "These Days," about learning the killer's art, this is another perfect description of what Curtis believed he was doing in a concert and what he believed he was doing with his writing. One must now note the elegance in the construction of "These Days," in the sense what is being described is not only a rhetorical way of speaking about the writing process but the description of a major shift in the singer's position. For a period of time he impersonated the character of the killer in his lyrics, until he understands that, as he turns his lyrics into more personal constructions, it provokes a reaction in the audience; as that audience

demands more (“cries for more”), he now has to reshape himself in order to feed his audience with their demands—human suffering (in this case, his suffering). In that sense, the lines: “Used outward deception to get away, / Broken heart romance to make it pay,” again from “These Days,” develop on what Curtis was doing, using deception as a way to fit into the role of performer, using broken hearts as a subject of his performances. The point here is that these broken hearts do not belong to the realm of fantasy any more, they are an extension of his personal life and as such entail a set of responsibilities about what is being said.

Another song recorded around the time *Closer* was produced seems to state these problems straightforwardly. The last stanza of “Komakino” places writing on the same level as treatment:

How can I find the right way to control,  
All the conflicts inside, all the problems beside,  
As the questions arise, and the answers don't fit,  
Into my way of things,  
Into my way of things?

An attempt to control the conflicts inside is to write but, as it will be seen, writing solves nothing. The questions keep popping up and the answers—songs—are not suitable answers to those questions. This description seems closely connected to the lines from “Twenty-Four Hours”: “Now that I’ve realised how it’s all gone wrong, / Got to find some therapy, this treatment takes too long.” One of the problems in *Closer*, and one rarely mentioned, is Curtis’ attempt to deal with what writing involves and how all the attempts to take it as something central to his life fail as he discovers the different roles he assumes as a writer all fall short in bringing about consequences to his real life. What people have taken as direct hints on Curtis’ personal problems, the stating of the crisis which destroyed the balance he kept (namely his indecision between his wife and daughter, and the affair he kept with Annik), has more to it than just the biographical notes they refer to. The crisis described in those opening lines of “Passover” is a different sort of crisis; it is a crisis in the process of writing songs. Being able to write as himself, in opposition to writing from a character’s perspective, allowed for a momentary balance, but it came with a price: the realization writing is a meaningless activity—people dance to the songs but fail to grasp what the songs are about (even the band members fail to understand them). What makes *Closer* a special album then is the fact that at a certain point meaninglessness was built into the songs not only in the lyrics, but in the music itself; it was not just about stating things but about saying things without

disclosing what was being said—it was allowing for the songs to gain a metaphorical value which prior songs, particularly punk songs, were trying to extricate. Paul Morley, reviewing a Joy Division concert before the release of *Closer*, would note “the songs revealed a new extension of their language and possibility, and considering that live the songs are true caricatures of recorded versions, how these new ones will end up is a good mystery” (114). Morley was wondering what would happen to the new songs, the ones that would feature in *Closer*, how they would sound, perceiving already the language they were built on was significantly different; the power the songs had during performances, the power Sumner refers to, did not fit with such intricate language.

Taking into account the quality of the language used in the album, “Heart and Soul” stands out due to the vulgarity of its metaphors; it does not help that the ethereal lyrics are delivered in a hush tone as the music, also somehow toned down, keeps a repetitive structure all through the song. Probably the most difficult part to understand is the apparently meaningless refrain which repeats a verbal construction that has lost, by over-use, any metaphorical value. When overseeing the whole work done by Ian Curtis, even during the punk period, it always seems sad to encounter such a plain construction as the refrain and title of this song. But what is happening in this refrain is exactly a play on the meaningfulness of its words, stressed precisely by the pattern of continuous repetition. It is the construction of the musical pattern which must be valued if one is to recognize Curtis is admitting writing failed as a treatment. In the studio version, a second guitar, played by Peter Hook, was added to replace the voice in the instrumental parts of the song. This guitar, that was not played live, fills in for the voice adding to the notion of an unbroken continuum not broken until the end, when the guitar fades out first, followed by the bass, until the music finally fades with only the drums playing. This construction mimes the refrain, in the sense the idea of a decision between heart or soul, between guitar and bass, is never settled until it becomes, finally, irrelevant by the fading of both; the possibility of choosing between one or the other is mere lyrical fancy, since writing songs cannot provide for the rational decision one continually strives for: “We have known for a long time that the heart has its reasons which reason knows not of. But we have come to think that reason can know them, that the knowing of them takes over the work of the heart, that what we require for salvation is more knowledge, knowledge of the sort we already know, that will fit the shape of our heads as they are” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 145). Songs do not provide answers, they merely

reproduce the anxiety one experiences in search of rational explanations for one's actions.

The problem with writing songs arises from the fact these can only deal with the past or with the future, there is no place for the present:

Existence well what does it matter?  
I exist on the best terms I can.  
The past is now part of my future,  
The present is well out of hand.

Beyond the lyrics, existence, meaning the present, is something there is no domain over and so the need to choose between heart (the love affair) and soul (the marriage and fatherhood) is completely irrelevant outside the scope of the song—Curtis is not only singing about his own life or about his doubts at the present, he is making a stand on the absurdity of writing songs about real life. This stanza is thus completely coherent with the last line of “Atrocity Exhibition,” where he invites to enter the asylum where he is performing, promising to show us the past and the future: “Take my hand and I’ll show you what was and will be.” What was and will be is the only thing he can show through the songs; the lunacy is not only dependent on people paying to see a man perform his suffering, it is also related to the fact so much personal investment has no return in the present, leaving people to celebrate something which has already happened or that may only happen in the future (no wonder Curtis sings, in “Isolation”: “a cruel wind bows down to our lunacy”). Understanding this position now seems central to grasping the last two songs of the album, respectively “The Eternal” and “Decades,” two strange lyrics accompanied by even more surprisingly peculiar music.

“The Eternal” is a description of how the powers of the writer close down on what surrounds him as he understands the meaninglessness of his position:

Played by the gate at the foot of the garden,  
My view stretches out from the fence to the wall,  
No words could explain, no actions determine,  
Just watching the trees and the leaves as they fall.

After understanding that in order to write he had to make himself part of the process, Curtis realized that even from that position he had limitations. Since nothing comes out from the process of writing except more writing, he turns around and writes a song about what surrounds him, a kind of pastoral construction of a home where he lacks the freedom of space one would expect to find in such a thing as a pastoral poem—his view

only stretches out from the fence to the wall. In this position he is left with writing about clouds passing by, trees and the leaves falling from those trees; after so much emotional investment Curtis' feelings are only accountable by analogy with the descriptions of the weather and of natural elements—what Donald Davie referred to as “nature poetry.”

With “Decades” the question is different and, at first glance, it seems a return to the realm of fantasy where one is able to walk on water and run through fire. Yet this is a much more complex construction. Like the asylums in the first song of the album were a metaphor for venues where Joy Division performed, the Hell in this song is also a metaphor for those venues, a place where “we,” referring to the band members, “watched from the wings as the scenes were replaying,” seeing themselves as they had never seen—a “portrayal of the trauma and degeneration / The sorrows we suffered and never were free.” What is interesting in this final song from *Closer* is that the “I” pervading all the other songs is replaced by a “we” and the suffering which seemed to belong exclusively to Curtis is now shared by other people—the band, in my reading. And it is only fair it be so, since the music is as essential to what Curtis is writing as the lyrics are crucial to the creation of the music. Entering this Hell where they watch themselves playing is like entering a time machine where a few years feel like decades. Finally, everything turns into metaphors, as if nothing could be said otherwise:

Weary inside, now our heart's lost forever,  
Can't replace the fear, or the thrill of the chase,  
Each ritual showed up the door for our wanderings,  
Open then shut, then slammed in our face.

The heart is lost forever because it cannot replace the fear and the thrill, which marked the beginning of the band; and, since they are in Hell, the soul is also irreversibly lost. If we take the word “ritual” as standing for a live performance, what is being said is that all the possibilities from playing in a band kept disappearing through the process of constant repetition. It is particularly relevant that in the last line the door, already shut, still finds a way to be slammed; it is as if beyond the failing within each show, there was a failing inevitable from the get-go. It is a very gloomy ending, as if not only Curtis' ability to write was over but also the band's ability to perform. Like some people close to Ian Curtis have remarked about his wishes for the future, it is as if Curtis was already thinking of settling in Holland with Annik and running a bookshop, a place where the meaning of words is really irrelevant.

## Dead Souls

I have been trying to argue that to answer the “what” and “how” questions about punk seems somehow more relevant than answering to the “why” question, since answering that question tends to lead to misinterpretations based on the consequences of what has been done; however, the question still needs answering, and we might as well look for one answer which fits. The people who made punk happen were reacting to what they thought was a stagnation in the things they related to, not only music, but any kind of art; they were also doing it to copy the people they had respect for: they were emulating a particular set of heroes. The fact there was no real program attached to these activities, just vague ideas of moving against the musical establishment, was, naturally, one of the reasons for punk’s short time span:

How could you be tough and a loser at the same time? How could you play with right-wing imagery and not be trapped by it? How could you take a script from Rimbaud and avoid the mythological trajectory of that poet’s life? Built into Punk from the beginning was not only a tendency to self-destruction, but a short shelf-life. Despite what many of the groups professed, the movement enshrined failure: to succeed in conventional terms meant that you had failed on your own terms; to fail meant that you had succeeded. (Savage, *England’s Dreaming* 140)

In punk’s terms, to become successful was to be incorporated in the thing you moved against in the first place and, as such, to fail in the original goal; in any case, what punk allowed for, and this is probably punk’s greatest achievement, was a chance of public exposure for many people who would have no opportunity in any other circumstances (since they were deemed as failures under conventional norms). These people, because they had such a different set of heroes, naturally digressed very quickly from the main musical current they came from, and what has been known as post-punk, or new wave, is a reflection of the different interests had by the many people gathered around punk.

The relevance of asking “why,” in the case of Joy Division, is of a different kind. Holding the description made of Joy Division as true, asking why someone who seems to struggle so much to write lyrics should keep on doing it appears crucial. The first point on this is an ironic one, since Curtis committed suicide, and one might draw a close connection between his struggle in dealing with his life as a performer and his personal life. In this sense, writing as a therapeutic way to deal with life’s problems seems to have failed, as the many hints in *Closer* suggest, leaving suicide as the only way out. Yet, taking as an example the song “Isolation,” where he sings: “Can I go on with this train of



events, / Disturbing and purging my mind,” the idea of writing as a therapy that failed seems problematic. In a sense, while all the problems arising from the writing might be real, there is a purging capacity to them, and to the process itself, worth mentioning. In this song, one must bear in mind isolation is taken as the “one lucky prize” writing brings along, and so one might wonder if the fact writing fails as a therapy is all there is to it:

But if you could just see the beauty,  
These things I could never describe,  
These pleasures a wayward distraction,  
This is my one lucky prize.

Within this frame, writing is still a pleasure, even when the writer believes his work is failing, since he cannot depict all he hopes to; the problem is that the pleasure of writing meets no reward except isolation. In the same song, Curtis sings:

Surrendered to self-preservation,  
From others who care for themselves.  
A blindness that touches perfection,  
But hurts just like anything else.

Isolation comes from the fact one has to preserve oneself from people who just care for themselves, which ironically twists the writer’s position to equal grounds where he also has to care just for himself. The difficulty in understanding these lines comes from the fact this position entitles a blindness touching perfection: but in what sense does it touch perfection and why does such perfection hurt? In a certain sense, it is not clear, for those who hear, that these words have a meaning going beyond their understanding, that these words were not put together for their benefit. Each individual stands in his own world, blind to the problems in everyone else’s world. The perfection would then be a consequence of the writer’s attempt to remove all interference concerning his life from what he writes. The problem is not the fact one is writing about one’s own life, but that no one else can understand what is being said about that life. This is another position conferring meaninglessness to the exercise of writing, just as the realization nothing follows from the act of writing, and in a way it is close to the unproductive idea writing could have therapeutic qualities.

Deborah Curtis, in her biography of her husband, while describing his teenage years, writes the following about his relationship with a friend:

He found a soul-mate in Terry Mason. They had both spent a large portion of their lives avidly reading the music press and waiting in record shops, hoping to be the first to buy each new release. They saw music as the main ingredient in life and believed everything the music press said. Ian in particular reveled in the tortured lives depicted in the songs of the Velvet Underground; any music which didn't demonstrate a certain sadness, violence, or perhaps a struggle against impossible odds, was dismissed. (Curtis 42)

The argument I am trying to put forward is the notion that the difficulty Curtis is dealing with is not just related to the problems of his personal life or the particular difficulties writing poses, but with an inadequacy in reaching up to and, in a sense, in emulating those who are the reason for him to write in the first place. All of Curtis' writing deals with the anguish of measuring his work against the works of the characters who led him to writing; however, his notion of these characters and of their "tortured lives" is conveyed through the songs. It is this detail, this moral conception about what constitutes other people's lives which puts pressure in his activity as a writer, the fact his writing does not entail the lives he can reconstruct from his heroes' songs. Prior to the songs of *Closer* and the issues they address, "Dead Souls" was already marking the mood those later songs were written in.

"Dead Souls" stands as one of the most accomplished songs by Joy Division, sharing with "Love Will Tear Us Apart" the particularity of never having been released in the official albums. It is in that song, "Dead Souls," where Curtis answers the "why" question. The song, featuring a long musical intro, has only two stanzas, each followed by the repetition of the refrain:

Someone take these dreams away,  
That point me to another day.  
A duel of personalities,  
That stretch all true realities.

That keep calling me,  
They keep calling me,  
Keep on calling me,  
They keep calling me.

Where figures from the past stand tall,  
And mocking voices ring the halls.  
Imperialistic house of prayer,  
Conquistadors who took their share.

That keep calling me,  
They keep calling me,  
Keep on calling me,  
They keep calling me.

As seen in a previous essay, one of the problems with songs is that they can only refer to the past or the future; here, what is constantly pointing to another day are dreams, and it does not seem inappropriate to assume songs and dreams are interchangeable. This equivalence between songs and dreams is emphasized by the two following lines, where the problems described about writing songs seem to be designated by the reference to the “duel of personalities”; the verb’s subject in the last line of this stanza is “personalities,” which means it is not the duel that stretches realities, it is the different personalities arising from the dreams he wants taken away. The removal of these dreams seems a hard task, not only because someone else has to do it, but mainly because they keep calling for the singer. As the first stanza relates to the refrain, so the refrain is entangled in the second stanza: the voices that keep calling seem to come from the place mentioned in the second stanza—the “imperialistic house of prayer.” In the second stanza, there seems to be a correlation between the title of the song and what is being sung, in what seems to be a description of the dead souls as characters from the past standing tall and seeming to have fulfilled whatever it was they set out to do (hence the title “conquistadores”). In the relation of the first stanza to the first refrain one gets the notion it is the dreams that keep calling; from the second stanza to the refrain it seems the origin of the calling is different, probably in reference to the dead souls of the title, but also in reference to the “figures from the past” and “mocking voices” introduced in the second stanza. If I am correct, what this means is that the “they” in both refrains has always the same referent—songs. In the first refrain, the songs are the singer’s own songs, his dreams; in the second refrain, the songs are from other people, figures from the past, “conquistadores who took their share.”

If the correlation between dreams and songs is not evident enough, one should look at a different recording of this song, made in London for the first “Transmission” demo, where there is a third stanza that clarifies some points:

Another day, another time,  
The dreams can’t stop or rectify.  
We’re born into a living scene,  
It draws me in, it keeps calling me.<sup>23</sup>

Again, the main point is nothing follows from writing, that there is no interference of writing in real life as stated in the first two lines. Another interesting point to be made about this stanza is the fact the refrain following it changes the verb from “keep” to

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<sup>23</sup> Taken from <http://www.joydiv.org/shadowplay/joyd/deadsouls.html>, with changes in the punctuation.

“keeps,” in accordance to the singular of “living scene;” it is that living scene that keeps calling. The change in this refrain’s verb is in accordance with the parallel established before about each refrain being in accordance with the stanza preceding it. This implies there are three reasons to write: dreams, songs from the past, and life itself. It is interesting, in this sense, that the third stanza has been cut off from the final version of the song, as if life were not reason enough to make one write. In line with what would follow the recording of this song, namely *Closer*, life was not reason enough to answer the question why one writes; life would eventually stand as an obstacle, or at least, as something that did not fit into the ideal image Curtis had of what a writer’s life should be. It is as if the lyrics’ lack of influence on the life he wished to have was the main issue, that somehow the inability of writing to reproduce the high standards he aimed at was the real question. What seems a peculiar problem is much more common than one would expect, and it has to do with the idea some authors live through their work, as if the petty little worries of life had no place in their world.

By removing that third stanza, Curtis is singing about two things which keep making him write: the dreams pointing him to another day, and the figures from the past that stand tall. These are two fair ways to answer the question “why keep writing?,” and the kind of answers many writers would not hesitate giving. In relation to the latter, it implies a relationship to other human beings with whom we feel connected and feel compelled to follow, permitting to establish a line of references we can be associated with. The Buzzcocks had a similar relation with the Sex Pistols, a relation which would later be described on similar grounds as the relationship of love between two human beings in the song “Ever Fallen in Love?” (*Love Bites*, 1978); it is an explanation many artists give for doing what they do. The former is harder to explain because it implies one has dreams that have to translate into something. This is clearly not the subject of the writing, but the reason for writing—once these dreams are removed, there is no need to write. There is a necessary relation between having dreams which point towards another day and writing, but not between those dreams and what is being written. The last stanza is removed not only because just to live is not a good answer to the question why one writes but also because it distorts the relation between life and dreams. Dreams cannot intervene in life, but they can shape it; to say one is thrown into a living scene that keeps drawing one in is to say one lives and that is enough to explain one’s doings. Saying this removes the influence other people and dreams have in one’s life and, most relevantly, says very little about who we are.

In 1981, Echo and the Bunnymen, the band from Liverpool that most closely followed the musical traces left by Joy Division, released their second album, *Heaven Up There*. In this album, the band set the tone for what was to be called neo-romantic pop, a definition surely made up from the need to classify something as odd as Joy Division's *Closer*; it was also a reference to a move towards songs written with more far-fetched language drawing its references from an idealized notion of Romantic poetry. In that Echo and the Bunnymen album there is a song, "The Disease," which helps to understand what the main issue in Ian Curtis' writing is. When Ian McCulloch sings: "My life's the disease," he probably had something else in his mind than what follows, yet it is life as a disease which best defines Curtis; it defines him in the sense Curtis' songs are not just made up of lyrics accompanied by music which fits them, but are themselves a construction reproducing his way of living, like there was no other way of doing things. Just as in the case of "Heart and Soul," the problem lies in the fact one cannot expect life to be deciphered by a clever way of putting words; to choose between the heart and the soul is a beautiful way of ignoring that, no matter the choice, one is left with the consequences a decision inflicts in one's own life as well as in other people's lives. *Closer* articulates this double understanding of the process of writing: on the one hand, writing brings pain because of the detachment it has from life; on the other hand, when describing life through beautiful words one is ignoring the cruelty making decisions inflicts on other human beings (or on the writer himself). Perhaps those two last songs of *Closer*, "The Eternal" and "Decades," are the best attempts at dealing with these problems, in the sense the first confines the writing to the first person, who merely sits and describes what he can see, while the second uses the notion of a world completely removed from reality and so unable to connect with it. Both songs fail, as they keep reflecting the author's problems; just as there is no magic land where words have no meaning, there is no magic land where one can detach one's actions from life.

Richard Hell, in a diary entry quoted by Clinton Heylin, notes about the French symbolist poets that "[they] die young because they have the courage to lay the heart bare and write the book after which only death (or maybe conversion...) remains" (Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* 284). In some way, one might describe Curtis' life in the same vein; there are human beings who cannot live in a different way. People who change for no reason at all are common, as Curtis sings in "Passover," but it is a possibility which does not come to everyone. Writing is not an option for some individuals but rather a need; a need so strong it defines everything else. Deborah Curtis'

comment on the fact that had it not been for Curtis' suicide the lyrics of *Closer* would remain equivocal is, in the end, a very sound statement; the problem is the life of the writings only meets real life in hindsight, when one is describing a human being's life. Going back to the idea one is acting out his own death as an inability to write something better, one might now say nothing in writing makes sense until one stops acting his death and actually accomplishes it. One needs to die in order to be described through one's work—and only in that description is one's work the same as one's life. The only problem with Hell's depiction of the symbolists is in imagining one has to write a special book after which nothing but death or conversion remains—it is the death or the conversion which makes that book special, as Curtis' suicide makes *Closer* special.

## Everyday is Like Thursday

Among the bands proudly claiming the Englishness of their songs in the early 1990s there was someone who clearly distinguished himself from his peers. Neil Hannon, the man behind The Divine Comedy, made his Englishness, or his idea about what that Englishness could be, into his trademark. Most distinctively, he emphasized everything about the traits the press turned distinctive about the Britpop bands, particularly the use of irony, to the point where sarcasm would be a more precise qualification for some of his songs. What set Hannon apart from the other bands, however, was his position as an intellectual, a dandy; while everyone ran around in t-shirts and jeans, Hannon was showing up in impeccable suits and neat precision haircuts, reminiscent of the look of the bands from the sixties that were the main reference for this sudden British revival. Defining himself as a dandy made him different from others in Britpop in the sense he was not interested in conflating his singing with his own common life; by assuming he somehow stood apart from the other bands and their social concerns, Hannon could look at middle class from the outside, not from below (as a member of the working class) or even at the same level (as a member of the middle class). Hannon could, in this way, simultaneously use references to Tennyson and to *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), while orchestral arrangements would underline the pop structure of a song (such as in “Charge”).

In that most inspired album *Casanova* (1996), Hannon was already putting forward a critique addressed to most of the bands which were dominating the charts under the banner of Britpop; taking into account Oasis had come about as a major happening only two years before, Hannon was showing a very acute ability to scrutinize something that was just reaching its peak at that moment. Hannon chose to have orchestral accompaniment in the record, playing around with the seemingly paradoxical notion of a pop album treated, overall, as classical music. In the final sequence of the album, in what is called “Theme from Casanova,” one can hear the following description:

The Divine Comedy’s *Casanova*; a collection of songs for bass baritone and ensemble, inspired by the writings of the eighteenth century Venetian gambler, eroticist and spy; and performed for us there by the composer, Neil Hannon. He was accompanied in that 1995 recording by a specially assembled group of young musicians, under the baton of Dr. Joby Talbot. The programme was devised by The Divine Comedy, and was produced in our London studios by Darren Allison.

Now, as we're running a little ahead of schedule, there's just time for one extra item. So I'll leave you with the haunting strains of "Theme From Casanova..."

What might have seemed like a joke would go much further, since this was the album reaching the top of the charts and putting the band on the map of relevant bands during those years. Beyond the obvious anecdote, there is a tone in the record clearly mocking most of the assumed seriousness the middle-class subject was being treated with by other bands; this sense of humor would become part of Hannon's identity and part of the way his music would become recognizable.

In the song "Middle-Class Heroes," for instance, Hannon seems to attack the middle-class and its habits. In the intro section, where Hannon sustains a dialogue we hear only his side of, one is made aware Hannon is portraying some kind of fortuneteller; to the unheard request of a little girl, Hannon introduces what are the main lines of that girl's life, describing the different stages of a middle-class child, from school exams, to the university and right up to the first underpaid job in advertising. To the urge of more money, an urge apparently answered for, the capacities of this fortuneteller seem to be enhanced and "the fog" lifts, introducing the melody. The stanzas that follow, in which Hannon abandons the dialogue voice and sings, describe what would be such a life, with details about house decoration:

I see oriental paper globes  
Hanging like decomposing cocoons  
While exotic candles overload  
The musty air with their stale perfumes;  
And I see lentils, beans, seaweed and rice  
In jars on the window-sill  
And it ain't hardly enough to feed the mice  
Running behind the lines of allergy pills.

All these things will come to pass  
When heroes of the middle-class  
Face up to their responsibilities.

I see an Indian fertility god—  
He's got thirty-seven limbs to spare—  
And tasteless tie-dyed tablecloths,  
That double up as evening wear,  
And I see naked bodies twist and turn  
On the futon of dreams fulfilled  
But their three-year-old kid seems unconcerned—  
He'd rather swallow all those allergy pills

The future seems predictable as soon as the middle-class heroes of the title assume their responsibilities, which seems to mean some life patterns necessarily follow from facing responsibilities. The refrain will mark the separation between the first three stanzas;



nonetheless, the third stanza is of a different sort from the first two, something marked by the different quality of voice, assuming the position of a preacher announcing doomsday, with the percussion instruments taking over the music while the piano struggles to be heard. Instead of describing peculiarities in the decoration of a future house, the fortuneteller sees “unspeakable vulgarity / institutionalised mediocrity / infinite tragedy,” as if the previous descriptions could never aim at something other than triviality.

Up to this point we have a pretty standard rendition of middle-class, somewhat derivative of the eternal attacks on the *bourgeoisie* common since the nineteenth century. The song becomes more interesting in the following lines, in the plea for action made by the singer: “Rise up little souls—join the doomed army / Fight the good fight—wage the unwinnable war.” This is, naturally, a different kind of vision (if a vision, at all); what is being incited is a war against ordinariness. The nature of this war is not political, but aesthetical, as the last lines of the stanza attest to: “Elegance against ignorance / Difference against indifference / Wit against shit.” What is peculiar and interesting in this song is the idea that all of the things under attack will “come to pass” when the heroes of the middle-class face up to their responsibilities and so an attempt to find a different future is useless when one should expect predicting the future would somehow allow for different and better things to come. However there are no different things and no better world: this is it. The song evokes a natural course of action in one’s life which will inevitably lead to something similar to what is being described; implied is that no matter how much we protest against such things, as we assume our responsibilities, we have to deal with. The only thing one is left with is exactly an attempt to describe the world differently, with elegance and wit, as the description made in the first stanzas tries to do; in that sense, elegance and witticism are mere rhetorical devices and the change asked for is aesthetic. Testifying to this is the last part of the song which begins with an addition to the refrain: “All my words fly up to heaven, my thoughts remain below / Words said without feeling never to heaven go...” The quote is from *Hamlet*, act III, scene III; Claudius, the King, utters these words when he rises from praying, acknowledging that in order to be forgiven he needs to do more than to just utter the words: words without thoughts, as in words not meant, are meaningless. In his previous monologue, Claudius confesses to his crime and wonders what kind of prayer would be most effective in order to get his repentance:

And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,  
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,  
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;  
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer  
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder?'  
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd  
Of those effects for which I did the murder,  
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.

Claudius understands it is not possible to be forgiven for the crime he has committed without renouncing the benefits he has obtained as a consequence for his crime: the crown, his ambition to be king, and the queen. In this sense, the notion words without thoughts are meaningless parallels the notion words without actions are meaningless. Since the words of the prayer are directed towards Heaven whereas their substance, thoughts and actions, remains below, nothing will come out of them and so all hope for forgiveness is gone. What Hannon is implying by the use of Claudius' words is that expecting consequences from the mere use of words is unreasonable; to intensify this, Hannon adds the word "all" at the beginning of the quote, underlying the strength of the pronoun "my," and thus corrupting the structure of the song: it is not just the words of heroes which lack meaning, the author's own words are of the same sort—all of his words. Claims for honesty and pure thoughts do not make the words mean more; the irony of the song lies in assuming what makes words meaningful is elegance, difference and wit—which means, more words.

As some critics noted about "Middle-Class Heroes," Hannon might have been addressing some of his most distinguished contemporaries from the Britpop movement. Oasis, Blur, Suede and Pulp were all bands which had gained a wide visibility, mostly in the aftermath of the sudden public acknowledgment of Oasis' first album, *Definitely Maybe*, in 1994. On the basis of that success, British bands were suddenly associated with a revival of the 1960s, as their music was described as holding references not only to The Beatles but also to an assortment of other British bands from that period: from The Kinks and The Who to Small Faces and The Animals. Ray Davies, one of the figures appointed as responsible for the English pop sound, dryly commented on Britpop:

To a certain extent, all new contemporary music was regurgitating itself in the mid 1990's. Britpop had been a celebration of the British sensibility that didn't say or add anything new except techno sounds and multicultural rhythms. The England I wrote about had either vanished or only existed in my head. The buildings were the same, but the people had gone. (Davies, *Americana* 7)

Davies is recognizing his songs were a major influence for the sound of these bands; but he recognizes none of the social concerns he felt were at the heart of his own creations.

Even punk, in the seventies, was clearly associated with the working-class, geographically associated with bigger cities; Britpop was a marked middle-class movement, associated with suburban life, and all the attempts at devaluing such status failed. Jon Savage's introduction to Suede, back in 1994, is an example of the kind of attitude the media held towards bands associated with Britpop:

Pop (and rock's) rhetoric is of the inner city, but scratch the surface of most English pop stars and you'll find a suburban boy or girl, noses pressed against the window, dreaming of escape, of transformation. Suede are no exception: drummer Simon Gilbert comes from Stratford-upon-Avon; guitarist Bernard Butler from Leyton, east London; Brett Anderson and bassist Mat Osman grew up in Haywards Heath, a dormitory 40 miles south of the capital. (Savage, *Time Travel* 342-3)

The suburban status of its members was not the only feature holding strong the association between Britpop and middle-class, there was also the emphasis on middle-class life portrayed in the songs (the common life Pulp sang about in "Common People"); although most songs held a negative *innuendo* on middle-class life, they were, nonetheless, descriptions of that life and of the struggle to escape and/or transform it. Within this context, "Middle-Class Heroes" could be seen as an attack on the Britpop bands, as many members of those bands, most belonging to the middle-class, were now being acclaimed as national heroes, on account of their attack on the influence of American music on Britain and their subsequent praise of British musical references. In that sense, what Hannon is saying with "Middle-Class Heroes" is the status of heroes is transitory, for band members and for the audience; writing, singing, and/or hearing these songs about the urge for escape and transformation will not bring any consequences in real life; they are mere rhetoric, an "unwinnable war" because it is a battle held between two different spheres, between the world created by the songs and the real world they refer to.

When The Divine Comedy released the album *Bang Goes the Knighthood*, in 2010, there seemed to be no change in Hannon's attitude; to be sure, most of the album contained a set of songs which could easily stand among the most traceable to the band. From the sarcastic positions towards the economic crisis to the irony in the lyrics and the dramatization of the music, with the usual sense of humor coming right up front in the album's title, everything seemed to belong within the realm of previous works by the band. The only exception was the song released as the first single, "At the Indie Disco"; this particular song does not exactly seem to belong with the rest of the songs in the album and would be a peculiar match with songs like the ones featuring in *Casanova*, to name the most obvious example. The song seems so discharged of irony it was taken by

some as a homage to certain bands which helped to form and sustain the notion of “indie music”—heroes of a kind. The song follows a basic pop structure where Hannon puts no particular stresses in his voice, as is so often the case. It describes a Thursday night out at a disco where indie music plays as part of a routine that comes with a table where a group of friends always sits, “under a poster of Morrissey with a bunch of flowers.” After the first two stanzas, there are two lines with the enumeration of some of the bands one could hear at this disco and the kind of reaction taking place on the dance floor to the sound of songs by these bands:

Give us some Pixies and some Roses and some Valentines  
Give us some Blur and some Cure and some Wannadies  
And now we're moving to the beat  
And staring at each others feet  
I wonder if she fancies me  
At the indie disco, the indie disco  
At the indie disco, yeah.

Each enumeration is underlined by violins while a female voice sings “and we’re in heaven” after the first line, and “we’ll dance forever” after the second line; the kind of pleasure these bands’ music arouses is obviously apparent in the first backing vocal, while its ability to endure is clearly proven by the second backing vocal. There is here a relation with the kind of monotony which was under scrutiny in “Middle-Class Heroes,” and the female voice underlined by the violins sounds similar to those ironic voice modulations Hannon uses in many songs to convey irony.

However, the main irony in this song is neither evident in the music nor in the voice modulations; the main irony lies in what is being said about the relation established between music and human beings:

And when it's over and I'm freezing on the night-bus home  
I think of her and I sing the words to my favourite song (Oh Yeah)  
She makes my heart beat the same way  
As at the start of Blue Monday  
Always the last song that they play  
At the indie disco, the indie disco  
At the indie disco, yeah.

Not only does the start of a song (“Blue Monday”) make him feel the same way as the girl he is infatuated with does, but also just thinking about that girl makes him sing the lyrics to his favorite song. What is remarkably ironic is the fact there are some human beings songs seem absolutely crucial for in order to account for relationships with other human beings: songs establish and describe relationships and, if they make hearts beat in

the same way as a song's opening, they seem to have the same consequences as those relationships. We could ask what the difference between seeing a particular girl or hearing the start of New Order's "Blue Monday" would be; in a very simple sense, it would be much easier to nurture a relationship with a song. The irony is even more intense if we take into account the first line of the stanza, a line one could describe as a piece of realistic writing about catching a late night bus, emphasizing a connection with a type of middle-class youth.

The relevance ascribed to songs in "At the Indie Disco" blurs the distinction between real life and the life described in songs; to some people, like the ones described, songs are a very important part of life. We might even say they create life, in the sense some people learn to connect with real life through songs. Going back to the last stanza of "Middle-Class Heroes," the idea behind repentance, which is asked for, might now have a different undertone:

All these things will come to pass  
When heroes of the middle-class  
Face up, repent, and pay the price  
For accidentally creating life  
An oversight for which they must atone  
And sacrifice their own.

If we identify these middle-class heroes with the Britpop bands, as some critics have done, creating life might refer not only to bearing children but also to the act of creating songs. The relevance of songs in some people's lives does not exclude the need for such real events as catching a night bus, but one easily figures how those songs might be mistaken for real life, when they can so easily stir the same feelings as human beings; finally, what the middle-class heroes must repent for is the act of presuming it possible to exist within the realm of the songs, of assuming escape and transformation will come through songs. "Middle-Class Heroes" is addressing, and criticizing, the vulgarity of songs built on the supposition words have consequences in real life; such a war on vulgarity is not fought with pleas for revolutions, it is fought with more songs: different, elegant, and witty songs people might dance to in some discos. What Hannon is implying is that the qualification of heroes is determined everyday Thursday night.

## Dandy in Rags

Discrepancies between lyrics printed in booklets and lyrics as they are sung are very common; Divine Comedy's "At the Indie Disco" has a peculiar discrepancy that should be analyzed. In the booklet, the beginning of the second stanza reads: "We've got a table in the corner that is always ours / Next to the poster of Morrissey with a bunch of flowers." What Hannon actually sings is "under the poster," and not "next to the poster."<sup>24</sup> The change in the position of the poster corresponds, roughly, to Peter Geach's distinction between *latria* and *dulia*, as described in his *God and the Soul* (101); quoting the description given to him by a philosopher of his acquaintance, the distinction rests on the notion that one bends a knee in praise of a saint (*dulia*), while to praise God one bends both knees, showing respect to the one who oversees everything, the one true god (*latria*). The religious connotation in Geach's description might seem out of place in connection to a pop star poster, but the shift regarding the positioning of that poster entails recognition of a kind of authority; Donald Davie, commenting on a poem by Kingsley Amis on different kinds of authority, acknowledges that in some men authority might be related with something only understandable from a religious stance:

The last three lines of the poem suggest that the answer to the conundrum is to acknowledge that the source of authority is human (some men have it, others haven't), but that this does not make it any less real. Indeed, the last four words—"Or so O'Grady says"—may be taken to mean that the location of authority in some men rather than in others may in fact have a divine or metaphysical sanction. (Davie 85)

What Hannon is recognizing with the poster's change is that Morrissey is the authority overseeing the behavior described in the song. It is the recognition of Morrissey's relevance in the existence of certain kinds of behavior, and hence in the existence of certain types of people—people who go to specific discos on Thursday nights. Morrissey, and The Smiths, were responsible not only for a certain kind of music which Hannon is celebrating, but also for the kind of behavior the characters in the song exhibit.

If the religious connotations still sound misplaced, one needs only to remember Peter Hook, detailing the first Sex Pistols' concert in the Manchester Lesser Free Trade

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<sup>24</sup> There are several live performances that oscillate between the two versions although it seems that the lyrics as they are sung in the album prevail.

Hall, describing Johnny Rotten and explaining it was him who made the difference, who made it unable to look away from the stage. In his autobiography, Morrissey comments on the attraction singers hold over the audience: “The song bears witness, the body weaves, and there are no camera cuts to blandly smiling session-players when all we want to see is the sculptured singer—alone, carrying all, sub-plot and sub-text, the physical autobiography; simultaneously, subjectively and objectively at the same time” (45). With Morrissey, the experience goes past the performance; it extends to every aspect of his existence as a pop star. He is the man that refused to say what was expected of him, the man that rebelled without raising his voice. There is, in the defiance of someone who did not need to change everything to stand as a revolutionary, something appealing, something the implicit violence of punk could not fulfill. Violence was not completely removed from the world of The Smiths, as Morrissey many times insinuates about their live performances, but it was not a requirement as it was with punk. The most obvious example of this is the title and the contents of The Smiths’ second album, *Meat Is Murder* (1985), an album that reached first position in the charts; in this album, Morrissey’s position on the issue of animal rights is turned into a song where the singer accuses those who eat meat of being murderers (not the kind of subject one would expect to hear about on *Top of the Pops*). We might believe this to be a trivial matter, but the point is very relevant: The Smiths proved it was possible to have meaningful music to dance to without compromising their personal beliefs; the band consistently held a commercial position in the charts without making concessions in their music to get there. It is possible to argue that had been the case before, with other bands, but all examples seem erratic when compared with The Smiths’ systematic presence in the charts, particularly taking into account they had very little airplay on the radios. After the band’s demise, in 1987, Morrissey went on with a solo career and kept on the same path as the band’s.

Neil Hannon, the man who recognizes Morrissey’s hierarchic position, has always been portrayed as a dandy, a description he struggled for, cultivating that image as a character he assumes while a performer. Morrissey, on the other hand, has blatantly refused to assume there is a distinction between his public and private self; assuming his membership in the working-class as not a proud place to speak from but as a mere circumstance, Morrissey, following Wilde, his hero, became a kind of dandy in rags (something he openly assumes in “This Charming Man”): “Like dear St. Francis of Assisi I am wedded to Poverty: but in my case the marriage is not a success; I hate the bride that has been given to me.’ And to Frank Harris, ‘A hole in the trousers may make

one as melancholy as Hamlet, and out of bad boots a Timon may be made” (Wilde quoted in Ellman 565). Of Oscar Wilde, Morrissey would say: “As the world’s first populist figure (first pop figure), Oscar Wilde exploded with original wisdom, advocating freedom for heart and soul, *and for all*—regardless of how the soul swirled” (98). Morrissey has never ceased to underline the extreme relevance Wilde always had (and still has) in his life, and much of the association with dandyism comes from assuming such relevance in public acts, as when he used to appear with flowers dangling from his trousers’ back pocket;<sup>25</sup> beyond that, he has always, since The Smiths came about in 1983, cultivated the image of the literary figure hovering above a field (the pop music industry) where literary concerns are usually not relevant, an attitude of snobbery picked up from the Wildean notion that an artist must contradict what is taken as the norm. In that sense, Morrissey’s position is very similar to Wilde’s and a contradiction to what one would expect from the behavior of a pop star:

They [the tabloids] hound me [...] and it gets very sticky. What makes me more dangerous to them than anybody else is the fact that I lead somewhat of a religious lifestyle. I’m not a rock ‘n’ roll character. I despise drugs, I despise cigarettes, I’m celibate and I live a very serene lifestyle. But I’m also making very strong statements lyrically, and this is very worrying to authoritarian figures. They can’t say that I’m in a druggy haze or soaking in alcohol and that I’ll get out of it. They probably think I’m some sort of sex-craved monster. But that’s okay—they can think what they like. I’m only interested in evidence, and they can’t produce any evidence to spoil my character. (Woods 58)

Morrissey does not refuse to be taken as a public character, with all it implies, he just refuses to be associated with the kind of people who thrive on that public character; for Morrissey there is no distinction between public and private character since that distinction would be taken as deceptiveness. The public descriptions Morrissey gave of himself and of The Smiths indicate a kind of integrity which led people to relate to the singer, sometimes beyond what might be considered normal (there were always reports of suicides linked to the songs, or people who embraced celibacy or vegetarianism, driven by Morrissey’s own life choice, or the fashion of tattooing lyrics or even Morrissey’s face). That integrity was looked after for so many years it attached itself to the man as a main characteristic few artists kept throughout their careers.

Apart from not behaving as was expected of a pop star, Morrissey cultivated an image which was in many ways peculiar: he performed with flowers dangling from his back pocket, danced in a very awkward way and refused to make concessions, whether to

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<sup>25</sup> “As I became a Smith, I used flowers because Oscar Wilde always used flowers. He once went to the Colorado salt mines and addressed a mass of miners there. He started the speech with, ‘Let me tell you why we worship the daffodil.’ ... I really admired his bravery and the idea of being constantly attached to some sort of plant” (Morrissey quoted in Goddard 131).



the industry, the media, or the public; The Smiths were the first band, for instance, to perform in *Top of the Pops* without using a microphone, refusing to indulge in the act of deceiving. Beyond all this, the music, the perfect combination between Morrissey's lyrics and Johnny Marr's guitar, was an essential part but not necessarily the most relevant one in assuring the relevance of the band in the British music scene. The strength of Morrissey's personality pervades everything and even if one acknowledges the extreme relevance of Marr's music in the creation of 'The Smiths' sound, there is always the notion that to talk about The Smiths is somehow to talk about Morrissey. This is due to the fact Morrissey made the crucial decisions about the aesthetics of the band; and while Marr, Mike Joyce, and Andy Rourke, might all share interest in some of those references, nonetheless, they were Morrissey's, something easily accounted for by the way his solo career developed. What were those references? Much of the critique on Morrissey's work has dealt with cataloguing every possible reference Morrissey's lyrics might contain; the problem is that there are so many of them we can hardly keep track. This is one of the most Wildean traits Morrissey cultivated throughout the years, as he clearly sang about in "Cemetery Gates," from *The Queen Is Dead* (1986):

A dreaded sunny day  
So I meet you at the cemetery gates  
Keats and Yeats are on your side  
A dreaded sunny day  
So I meet you at the cemetery gates  
Keats and Yeats are on your side  
While Wilde is on mine.

Apart from a mere alliteration in the last line, that association is an aesthetic manifesto; and it is specially relevant in this song since it addresses plagiarism. Supposedly, if one is to take the words as belonging to Morrissey, and not to a *persona* or character, one has to believe in the extreme irony of what is being sung. The narrator goes for a walk in a "cemetery" with a friend and there they discuss about the possibilities of using references in the poetry they write. The narrator's friend quotes from *Richard III*<sup>26</sup> and is immediately exposed by the narrator as a plagiarist, someone who has "read well." The irony, of course, lies in the fact that, if this narrator is Morrissey, then he has a lot to answer for, since his lyrics are usually built around quotes from several sources, whether songs, films, or books.

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<sup>26</sup> The line quoted is from Act V: "Ere thrice the sun done salutation to the dawn."

Although there are many difficulties in pinpointing the source of the irony attached to some songs, in this particular one the irony is plainly identifiable:

You say: "Ere long done do does did"  
Words which could only be your own  
And then produce the text  
From whence was ripped  
(Some dizzy whore, 1804).

Even a gibberish sentence as the one quoted, a senseless utterance we assume could only belong to the speaker, passes as a quotation; the joke is that such gibberish has been ripped and, having been ripped, it belongs to someone in a dizzy state. That someone in a dizzy state can suddenly be relevant just because it has been quoted is naturally peculiar, implying quotations automatically have relevance; that this is not necessarily so is being asserted: quotes do not automatically have dignity because they are properly identified (actually, the opposite happens here). Morrissey is playing with the idea put forward by Wilde in his review "Olivia at the Lyceum": "It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything." If one annexes everything, then all utterances one ever makes are a quote from somewhere. Adding to the irony is the misspelled title of the song, which has never been fully explained, and bears the odd nuance of having a similarity with "symmetry," something which, in discussing poetry and Wilde, resounds perfectly within Morrissey's work.

The parallels between Morrissey and Wilde do not cease in this song, they are extended and cultivated by Morrissey in his public appearances. As Len Brown notes in *Meetings With Morrissey*:

By now, significantly, and in truly Wildean fashion, he would soon sever his Christian name. "Steve the Nutter" would die and people would have to refer to him solely as "Morrissey." "I just felt this absolutely massive relief at not being called Steven anymore," he explained, as if the act in itself distanced him from that awkward Stretford youth, that unfortunate Salford lad. (Brown 64)

Morrissey had spent his early teenage years attempting to obtain the post of correspondent for the *NME* in Manchester, constantly writing letters until the newspaper cut him off. In the city he was known as the weirdo, Steven the Nutter, and he could be seen at most of the main musical events, including the famous first Sex Pistols appearance at the Manchester Free Trade Hall (curiously he lost the place in the *NME* to Paul Morley, one of the leading music journalists of the following decades,

someone who ended up interviewing Morrissey for several newspapers). Adopting just the designation “Morrissey” is a reconstruction of Wilde’s early career decision to drop his middle names in the hope that in the future he could be known only as “the Oscar” or “the Wilde.” The relevance of the name change in Morrissey’s case was that it enabled a new life, as if the name Steven was intrinsically associated with a series of relationships he needed to part from. Morrissey is not just a character or a pseudonym but a new personality which dissolved the former personality.<sup>27</sup>

To add to the cultivated image of the literate *enfant terrible* often associated with Wilde, there is an overall attitude in Morrissey’s public image which goes to the heart of a kind of Wildean caricature, mainly considering his attitude in interviews. Many of his interviewers have reacted with hostility to Morrissey’s attitude, accusing him of lying or being ostensibly cryptic. In his extensive study of Morrissey’s work, for instance, Gavin Hopps admires Morrissey’s ability to never break character in interviews; registering an exchange of words between the singer and Jools Holland, on *Later... with Jools Holland*, in May 2004, Hopps writes: “[the short exchange of words] reveals, for instance, that he’s witty and slippery and remains in character when he’s offstage” (2). This small description of an interview has many implications for what Hopps will put forward in his study, particularly the ideas around sincerity, by suggesting there is a different Morrissey from the one we get to know through the songs and the interviews. Talking to Andrew Deevoy for *Q*, in 1992, for instance, Morrissey tries to argue there is no difference between the artist and the human being:

Deevoy: Billy Bragg said that it must be hard being Morrissey, this fabulous witty, Wildean character, 24 hours a day.

Morrissey: Oh, I clock off. I clock off and brew up. It must be very hard to be Billy Bragg, but I won’t say why! Actually, I retract that, I’m a big fan of his.

Deevoy: But the implication is that Morrissey is a slightly contrived character.

Morrissey: Well I don’t slip into a suit and practice a certain tone of voice, no. There’s no persona as such. It’s just what you see across this table. (Woods 139)

Trying to be funny about Bragg’s comment, Morrissey opens the flank to the idea all he says is just part of an act by saying he “clocks off”; when called upon that apparent *faux pas*, he has to stand his ground. There are many examples of this kind of behavior, but a particular relevant one is the one exhibited in an interview in 2006, curiously to Morley. It is a strange interview, in the sense there seems to be much hostility, particularly on Morley’s part, who seems fed up by Morrissey’s continual refusal to be explicit about the

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Ellman describes Wilde’s years in Oxford much in the same way, stating that Wilde recreated himself there (Ellman 98).

questions he is being asked (fair enough, Morley seems tired not from this particular interview, but from constant dealings with Morrissey for more than twenty years):

Morley: But the perception is that this is the case, hence the incandescent nosiness, and then the nosiness and prurient wonder is provoked by interviews like this, where you slip into grimly playful interview mode. People want to know, does he have a good time, does he watch telly, what's he laughing at, who are his friends?...

Morrissey: What's it matter? The truth is in the songs. So much is in the songs. No one is so interested in those questions in relation to a champion ice skater... they either succeed or they don't succeed...

Morley: But your songs and where they go, tempt us to find out more, or to find out how and why they appear.

Morrissey: It's all in the songs.

Morley: The interest suggests then that maybe you haven't succeeded... because you're not quite sure what you are.

Morrissey: I'm very sure about myself... (*exhaustion*)

Morley: But no one else is.

Morrissey: I can't help that. Why should I care about that? It's just not my problem. I can't issue daily newsletters about my behavior to help everyone figure me out. It's just simple pop music. I just wanted to be Bobby out of the Righteous Brothers.

Morley: You just wanted to be Bobby of the Righteous Brothers, and we're all looking to you to be a combination of Wittgenstein, Dorothy Parker and Oscar Wilde.

Morrissey: Well, I am that as well. (Woods, 217)

These examples reveal the extreme difficulty journalists who have to interview Morrissey feel regarding the answers they are given. The difficulty arises from the idea the public figure must have a private counterpart somehow different, implying most of what he says is for the benefit of his public image; that is definitely the case, but my argument is that there is nothing else beyond the histrionic and controversial public character.

What makes Morrissey different from every other pop star is exactly the fact there is no space for a second life outside the one which is public. Morrissey notes the difference not only by opposition to other pop stars but also by opposition to the other members of The Smiths:

I suppose my input is more serious. And much more crucially personal. I think that at the end of this experience, if or when The Smiths break up, I feel sure that the other three group members could walk on to something else, but I don't think I could because I fear this is absolutely it for me, and my neck is in the noose, almost. The other three can step back and they can claim disinvolvement. But I never could. I'll risk anything. (Woods 33)

At this point, Morrissey was still beginning his career, still speaking as the dandy in rags, as someone who had nothing to live on besides the music. A few years later, already as a solo artist, and after having acquired a mansion in the outskirts of Manchester, Morrissey replied in this manner to the implication his financial well-being might "endanger his creative impulse":

No, because I still make the crucial error of believing that records I make are my life. But these days I want to be slightly more methodical. I do realize that I have an audience and that they would possibly like me to be on television a lot more than I am, but I can only orchestrate things in a natural way. There's nothing show business about me, nothing at all. Sometimes I'm astonished that I manage to do as much as I do when I consider how detached I am. You don't seem very convinced... (Woods 115)

For Morrissey, money will change nothing; he is the character coming about in the songs and interviews without any need to change when the attention is not on him. When Morrissey says it is "all in the songs" he is simply admitting the songs are an extension of his own personality and so, in that sense, they are a reflection of who he is. Commenting on the trial about The Smiths' royalties' percentage, he says "Joyce and Marr set their own terms, allowing court events to justify their lives more than *The Queen is Dead* ever could" (Morrissey 350-1). Morrissey is picking up on another Wildean point:

A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament. Its beauty comes from the fact that the author is what he is. It has nothing to do with the fact that other people want what they want. Indeed, the moment that an artist takes notice of what other people want, and tries to supply the demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes a dull or an amusing craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman. (Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" 1052)

Embracing Wilde has this double edge to it: on the one hand, it offers a map to what an artist is and how he should behave; on the other hand, it requires the sacrifice of one's own life, since one has to continually renounce privacy: there is no middle ground. Most critics fail to grasp about Morrissey that the artist is not accomplished merely through the lyrics and the performances of the songs; the artist accomplishes himself through life. There is no difference between the Morrissey who performs and gives interviews and the Morrissey who sits home watching TV; there is never the chance of slipping off character since there is no character, just Morrissey.

## Natural Lies

Many people have tackled the commercial success and the impact The Smiths had in the United Kingdom, as well as their ongoing relevance in pop music worldwide, in different ways. The most acute descriptions of the band come associated with the lines from the song “Panic”:

Burn down the disco,  
Hang the blessed DJ,  
Because the music that they constantly play  
It says nothing to me about my life.

Morrissey himself has acknowledged the idea these are the lines best describing the band’s intentions as much of The Smiths’ work was based around the description of a particular social and economic *milieu*; in accordance with this, Morrissey’s public statements always made clear that The Smiths’ songs were created to fight the shallow pop songs having nothing to say about life beyond old used clichés. The Smiths’ music became, under these assumptions, the music of the English working-class during the 1980s and a kind of soundtrack to the period of Margaret Thatcher’s ruling as British Prime Minister—a dissention from MacColl’s ideas about the people’s music having a particular structure. In a very short time span, from 1976 to the end of the 1980s, Manchester gave rise to music styles such as punk, new wave, The Smiths’ pop, and the rave culture; each one of these styles has been, throughout the years, described as the perfect reflection of the working-class in a decaying urban landscape. Those descriptions are probably all correct, but they entail a binding relation between real life and music which seems incorrect since all these styles cannot simultaneously account for what the working-class music is or should be; this relation between real life and music has somewhat blurred the relevance some of the bands ended up having for music.

Looking carefully at The Smiths’ music, particularly at Morrissey’s lyrics, the idea of describing Manchester in the 1980s seems, in fact, very hard to explain if not in hindsight. The Smiths set out to reintroduce English pop, particularly by referring to the main figures of pop in the 1960s, as a valid and meaningful form of art. Morrissey, paying homage to Wilde, has maintained every subject is worthy of becoming art, and so he has been building a repertoire constituted by what one might refer to as unusual subjects, at least commercially speaking (songs from The Smiths’ first album dealt with

murderers and pedophiles); another example is 'The Smiths' art work, all arranged and decided by Morrissey, using mainly stills from old British films:

The essence of Smiths Art (*MozArt*) was the will to have every Smiths sleeve as well turned out as possible, and it came from an idea I had to take images that were the opposite of glamor and to pump enough heart and desire into them to show ordinariness as an instrument of power—or, possibly, glamor. Bits of neo-realism. Bits of brutality, with the task being to present cheerless and cluttered bed-sitter art in a beautiful and proudly frank way (note: *The World Won't Listen*). (Morrissey 196-7)

While this anxiety with ordinariness might seem to endorse political concerns, again putting the band's music as a kind of speaker for the working-class, what Morrissey tries to sustain in this relation with ordinariness is aesthetically motivated, as his nineteenth century mentor would approve of. One might claim the aesthetic use of such images would remove their value as neo-realist depictions of life, in the sense an aesthetic use of them would somehow simplify the relation they try to sustain with real life; but, as Richard Ellman notes about Oscar Wilde, life is not about simplification but about narratives: "The object of life is not to simplify it. As our conflicting impulses coincide, as our repressed feelings vie with our expressed ones, as our solid views disclose unexpected striations, we are all secret dramatists. In this light Wilde's works become exercises in self-criticism as well as pleas for tolerance" (100). In the same vein, one could describe Morrissey's work similarly: his work becomes an exercise in self-criticism and a plea for tolerance, which we understand and relate to because in the end we are all dramatists.

The relation between Morrissey's work and reality might be filtered through the lens of his relationship with Wilde. With this association in mind, one feels immediately tempted by Wilde's most resonant passages about life and art and how they influence each other. However, Morrissey's descent from Wilde is most clearly exemplified by a passage on the nature of the novel, from the essay "The Decay of Lying":

The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art. (Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 925-6)

The quality of a character is not related to a real existence, but with a particular relation to the work it is portrayed in; the quality of that work, on the other hand, depends on its relation to its author. This allows for Morrissey to sustain a very basic notion in his work, described the following way in the song "Nowhere Fast," from *Meat Is Murder*:

And if a day came when I felt a  
Natural emotion  
I'd get such a shock I'd probably jump  
In the ocean.

Morrissey assumes there are no natural emotions, recognizing the Wildean position that all human behavior is a fabrication, that there are no emotions or behaviors without a particular context. When the lines reappear in the song, Morrissey refines his position with a new ending but also with a new context:

And when I'm lying in my bed  
I think about life  
And I think about death  
And neither one particularly appeals to me.  
And if the day came when I felt a  
Natural emotion  
I'd get such a shock I'd probably lie  
In the middle of the street and die  
I'd lie down and die.

If neither life nor death have a particular appeal, then what is left? What is left are the songs. Concerns about this are articulated in Morrissey's *Autobiography*: "I begin to worry that my humility can be seen as a part of an act, but then, to edify my natural feelings is to then *become* an act. What do you do? There must be truth in all of it otherwise you are no different than a door-to-door salesman. To never feel guilt when you look into the eyes of the audience" (408). Something which truly distinguishes Morrissey from every other pop star is precisely the notion honesty does not depend on the relation between the songs and real life. One is reminded of the comment made by Wilde about Balzac: "But Balzac is no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it" ("The Decay of Lying" 927). The same might be said of Morrissey; The Smiths' music had so much appeal to so many people entirely due to Morrissey's ability to inflate his songs with life: life is something anyone can relate to (we are secret dramatists and life is, in the end, a very long tragedy).

At a certain point in his study of Morrissey, trying to make a larger argument on the idea of "darkness," Gavin Hopps dedicates a section to a detailed analysis of the song "I Know It's Over" (176-85). According to Hopps, the main difficulty in explaining the song is to articulate how such a complete artificial construction as this song can still give an honest description of suffering. The use of the expression "quasi-religious" is the first attempt at explaining how honesty can oversee such artificiality; the second attempt is to



introduce the notion of irony, stating the section of the song which is in direct speech is ironic and has to be regarded as a joke (although not meant at getting “many laughs”). In fact, Hopps understands the entire song should be looked at as having the structure of a joke, “building up and then suddenly puncturing our expectations”; identifying the “it” of the title with the section of direct speech, Hopps concludes: “The grotesque joke at the centre of the song therefore is that the singer is mourning the end of an affair (because it’s all he’s got) which consisted in someone—perhaps even an imaginary someone—cruelly making clear to him that he is—and ordinarily is—alone and taking from him any sense of self-value that he could possibly hold against such loneliness” (181). Acknowledging that simplifying the song with this narrative might be “ludicrous,” Hopps goes on to explain it is a way of underlining the “overarching ironies that distance Morrissey the writer from the singer and the speaker” (181); since Hopps wants to establish a connection with reality, he feels the need to stress that “such irony, however, is importantly not incompatible with realism” (181).

Hopps’ effort must be acknowledged, for the song is indeed hard to deal with; yet, his reading does not seem to account for everything going on in it, mainly because Hopps believes reality must have a say in what is happening. It might be noted there is a difficulty in dealing with a character who will be heard in direct speech although it is described as not being “very real”; the difficulty only persists if we do not recognize the descriptions of a song do not have to obey the same rules as reality, they are separated from reality by “the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment” (“The Decay of Lying” 929), or, in Neil Hannon’s words, by “elegance,” “difference,” and “wit.” As Morrissey puts it, they belong to the realm of fantasy:

Jennifer Nine: Have you been in love with people?

Morrissey: Oh yes. Real people with flesh and bones and eyes. But I’m so used to fantasy and everything being rock ‘n’ roll, I could never quite come out of the cinema and relate everything to the hard world. It was always at a distance. Always a dream. And I’m used to that now. I understand the life of books and films and music. (Woods 169)

Songs do not determine or act upon the “hard world,” they belong to another sphere. What is at stake in the direct speech section of the song is that fame has not brought any consequences to his love life; all the compliments given to the artist have had no influence on his loneliness:

“If you’re so funny  
Then why are you on your own tonight?  
And if you’re so clever

Then why are you on your own tonight?  
If you're so very entertaining  
Then why are you on your own tonight?  
If you're so very good-looking  
Why do you sleep alone tonight?  
I know...

'Cause tonight is just like any other night  
That's why you're on your own tonight  
With your triumphs and your charms  
While they're in each other's arms..."

This voice is the kind of voice we make up to keep sanity, when we realize we might have failed at the most basic activities in a normal life (the same way as Ray Davies made up someone he could sing to); in Morrissey's terms, normality is represented by marriage and subsequent love affairs, something elsewhere might have been described as a middle-class life (in this song, normality is represented by the figures of the "veiled bride," "handsome groom," and "loud, loutish lover"). In this sense, what is finally over is the possibility of reaching for that life, as he whispers before introducing the direct speech:

I know it's over  
And it never really began  
But in my heart it was so real  
And you even spoke to me, and said:

Since normality is something only felt real in his heart, the feelings associated with it can only be guessed. Love, for instance, is natural and real since it has never been felt if not in songs (one imagines if it were felt in real life it would be a shock):

It's so easy to laugh  
It's so easy to hate  
It takes guts to be gentle and kind  
Over, over...  
Love is natural and real  
But not for you, my love  
Not tonight, my love  
Love is natural and real  
But not for such as you and I, my love.

The quality of Morrissey as a lyricist might be attested in the way the word "over" subtly changes its meaning throughout the song, turning its meaning towards the idea of repetition: it takes guts to be gentle and kindle "over and over and over;" if this change is correct, it seems the gentleness and kindness are part of an effort to empathize with human behavior which would normally be laughable or easy to hate—such empathy is an essential part of the ability to write songs.

The elegance of this song lies in the first line, a line the song will eventually end with, turned into a kind of mantra by its constant repetition until the fade out: “Oh Mother, I can feel the soil falling over my head.” The slow death described in that line amounts to the liquidation of Morrissey’s private life: as he becomes more famous, the fewer chances he has at a normal life; his constant calls to his mother are an attempt to keep in touch with the reality he came from and he now has to renounce: “However, at the hour of the Smiths’ birth I had felt at the physical and emotional end of life. I had lost the ability to communicate and had been claimed by emotional oblivion. I had no doubt that my life was ending, as much as I had no notion at all that it was just beginning” (Morrissey 201). The incredible sadness Hopps tries to explain and we easily understand from the song comes from the fact the new life bears none of the promises which were expected of it; Morrissey already had a life of empty beds and lonely nights to account for and such life continues unaltered after he, with all his qualities (he is “funny,” “clever,” “entertaining,” and “good looking”), has reached fame; the saddest irony is that the soil falling over his head is being thrown by himself, as one life (the private) is buried and another (the public) is being built.

## The Art of Soccer

In 1992, Madness organized a festival at Finsbury Park, London, known as Madstock, to celebrate their reunion. Morrissey was due to appear as a support act on Sunday, the original date for the concert. As the tickets quickly sold out, an extra concert was booked for Saturday, again with Morrissey supporting. Clive Langer, one of Morrissey's producers, explains that, since there was no announcement of the Morrissey concert for Saturday, thirty thousand Madness fans were all there was in front of him when he started to perform (Goddard 298-9). Known for their rowdiness (which they proved by causing a minor earthquake moonstomping to the sound of "One Step Beyond"), the Madness fans were mainly composed of 'soft skins' and about one thousand 'hard skins', apparently the ones who caused a commotion by insulting and throwing objects onto the stage; Morrissey's line-up for the evening was probably not the most appropriate considering the audience. On the back of the stage was a giant cloth depicting two skinhead girls;<sup>28</sup> Morrissey supposedly arrived on stage with the Union Jack in his hand and began with "You Gonna Need Someone On Your Side." He followed with "Glamorous Glue," during which he flaunted the Union Jack around the stage for a while until he dropped it; during the instrumental part of the song he picked it up again and after the section where he repeats the line "London is dead" he threw the flag into the audience.

The show had only seven more songs: "Least Likely To," "The National Front Disco," "November Spawned A Monster," "We'll Let You Know," "Sister I'm A Poet," "Suedehead," and "You're The One For Me, Fatty." The show followed the release of *Your Arsenal* (1992), and the number of songs from that album reflects it; but the introduction of "Suedehead," his solo debut single from *Viva Hate* (1988), was just a mere provocation, if one has in mind that despite the song's lack of political commitment there were other songs on that list having a harsh undertone, particularly to the extreme right wing. The violent reaction of the audience towards Morrissey was not caused by his act of throwing the flag, but it was a crescendo of tension brought to a stop when Morrissey decided to leave the stage; he also decided, based on the audience's reaction to his show, to cancel his Sunday appearance. On the aftermath of the show, seemingly based on second hand accounts, the *NME* launched an attack on Morrissey

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<sup>28</sup> The image was Derek Ridgers' *Skinhead Girls, Bank Holiday*, Brighton, 1980.

which became famous for its violence; amid several accusations, the word “Nazi” was used in connection to the reports of the show. Among the reasons for the attacks, beyond the stir caused by the songs “The National Front Disco” and “We’ll Let You Know,” it was the flaunting of the Union Jack which seemed to arouse suspicions of Morrissey’s political allegiance to the right wing. Less than a year later, in April 1993, Brett Anderson, lead singer of Suede, would make the front cover of *Select* magazine, with the Union Jack as background and the plea “Yanks Go Home”; following the commercial success of the first Oasis album, the covers of music magazines would be proudly using the Union Jack as a background for the rising stars of Britpop, underlining the Englishness of the music they were making. Morrissey, who since the first The Smiths’ album was cataloguing and building his songs around references to ideas of Englishness, was suddenly accused of flirting with the rising extreme right movements. Accusations regarding Morrissey’s dubious positions on racial matters had started a few years earlier, when The Smiths’ song “Panic” was interpreted in a very peculiar way: the word “disco” was said to represent black music and the refrain “hang the DJ” was said to be reminiscent of a lynching; after Finsbury Park, the songs “Bengali in Platforms” (*Viva Hate*), “Asian Rut” (*Kill Uncle*, 1991), “National Front Disco,” and “We’ll Let You Know” were listed as racially dubious. After the events of Madstock and the *NME*’s attacks, Morrissey refused to give interviews to the newspaper for twelve years; after those twelve years, their relation was resumed only to be suspended once more in 2007, again under the accusations of racism, following the publication of some statements on immigration Morrissey said to be out of context.

In Morrissey’s defense, the songs under attack after Madstock, the one about the National Front and the one about hooligans, were more likely to have thrown him off the stage at the event for insulting the crowd’s skinhead tendencies than for being associated with them. It is very hard to understand the nature of the violent attacks by the press on Morrissey on the basis of those songs, since they are so deprecatory of their subjects; yet, the mere connection between the Union Jack and Morrissey was enough to cause such a stir, as if somehow his strong personality would taint the Union Jack with political *innuendos*, whereas, later on, the same flag would remain fairly neutral in the hands and beds of other pop stars. That Morrissey had such strength is something worthy of notice. Naturally, an artist formed under Wildean influence took advantage of the attacks, refusing to deny the accusations of racism the *NME* was continually supplying:

On the whole, an artist in England gains something by being attacked. His individuality is intensified. He becomes more completely himself. Of course, the attacks are very gross, very impertinent, and very contemptible. But then no artist expects grace from the vulgar mind, or style from the suburban intellect. Vulgarly and stupidity are two very vivid facts in modern life. One regrets them, naturally. But there they are. They are subjects for study, like everything else. And it is only fair to state, with regard to modern journalists, that they always apologise to one in private for what they have written against one in public. (Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" 1055)

Morrissey took Wilde's teachings to heart, ignoring the attacks and letting them come to an end by their mere vulgarity and stupidity; ironically, what was at stake in the songs under scrutiny was exactly a study on vulgarity, a subject Wilde would deem as worthy and a theme Morrissey had been developing not only in songs but also with the artwork of The Smiths. Based on this position, the *NME* might have had a point in their attacks if at their center was the notion Morrissey was attacking British art (and, by implication, British life in general) for its constant use of, particularly, American references; it was the same argument the Britpop bands used profitably to explain their music. But the album *Your Arsenal* was already explicitly about the losing of British identity; in "Glamorous Glue," for instance, before the repetition about the death of London, we can hear the line "we look to Los Angeles for the language we speak."

*Your Arsenal* was another attempt by Morrissey to find his own voice as a solo artist, to dissociate himself from the strong legacy The Smiths had left. The difficulty Morrissey was having was connected with the image he had given of himself, and the fear of being accused of incoherence might have been dangling over his mind. In a sense, what Morrissey was searching for with this album, as with the previous, was a kind of stability between his past and his future as an artist. Donald Davie clarifies the difficulty in accepting change by defining stability as a balance between rigidity and fluidity:

For stability, in the physical and the moral universes alike, might be defined as a controllable proportion between rigid elements and fluid elements, between the persistent and the unprecedented. Nowadays what drives the naturally intelligent conservative into reactionary postures is the way in which the fluid has totally overborne the rigid, the impossibility of finding grounds for thinking that any persistent element in his life is other than anachronistic survival, a removable impediment. Changeability seems to be total, as universal law; not only the tempo of change, but the scope of it, appears to be uncontrollable because illimitable. And in this case, the man who is stupid is not he who, however vainly, tries to resist change, but rather the many pragmatists among the apostles of change, those who think that they can stop it rolling, can alight, and can rigidify life in the momentary shape it will have taken, a shape which conforms to their interests or their principles. (Davie 174)

The bridge between being singer of The Smiths and being on his own had to be crossed without the idea Morrissey was in any way different from whom he had been; while having to reinvent himself as a solo artist, there was still the need for continuity in order

to be honest. That is probably why *Your Arsenal* seems to revolve around the negative relations some people have with music: “We Hate It When Our Friends Become Successful,” for instance, was described by Morrissey as being about the jealousy of people in Manchester, although it was later insinuated it was entirely composed thinking about Tim Booth, James’ lead singer, who had reached number two in the singles charts in 1989 with the song “Sit Down”; “Glamorous Glue” implies London is dead and people look to Los Angeles for the language they use, not only in films but also in musical production; the boy depicted in “National Front Disco” gets lost through music; the football hooligans sing songs which have no meaning. If other songs do not address music directly and the difficult relation with it, they somehow imply the hardship one has to go through to be honest to oneself in such a world as pop world. With *Your Arsenal*, Morrissey was experimenting with a new approach to writing by assuming palpably controversial characters he could sing through, something which, as the *NME*’s position demonstrates, would prove hard for some to understand, used to as they were to conflating the artist’s work with the man’s view.

The emotional relevance of *Your Arsenal* can be attested by the critical disillusion Morrissey’s prior album, *Kill Uncle*, had been; even twenty years after its release, Morrissey still has difficulties in relating to it: “Recording something for the sake of recording delivered *Kill Uncle* unto the world, and I am finally up against the limits of my abilities, whilst surely not fooling anybody. Having been so right, it is suddenly shocking to be so wrong, yet *Kill Uncle* is number 8 in England and number 52 in the US. It will always be the orphaned imp that nobody wants, and even I—its father and mother—find it difficult to feed” (Morrissey 239). Facing the next album as a kind of last chance, Morrissey attempted to find a more poignant approach, addressing what he believed to be an injustice towards his career; for all the attacks on *Kill Uncle*, attacks even he now acknowledges as somewhat fair, it still reached number eight on the charts. At the time, Morrissey believed it unjust to be on the target line of so many critics, who seemed to have forgotten Morrissey’s relevance to English music throughout the 1980s, particularly when the surrounding musical panorama was so obviously American oriented. *Your Arsenal* was then concerned with showing an injustice had been committed in the assessment of *Kill Uncle* and so the news about Morrissey’s career being over were clearly exaggerated; how was it possible that Morrissey’s contribution to English music could be so easily overlooked when the last remains of Englishness in music came from American influences, soccer hooligans, and National Front Discos? It was this view which triggered

the indignation of the press, with the line “England for the English,” from “National Front Disco,” under the radar of the *NME*. Morrissey, when instigated in interviews to comment on the case, has argued the line was between quotation marks, that those were not his words; looking into the song that seems to be quite clear.

A remarkable feature about the song is its insistence that the reason why this boy is at the National Front disco should be clear, since he has explained it over and over; yet, it remains unintelligible:

David, the wind blows  
The wind blows...  
Bits of your life away  
Your friends all say...  
“Where is our boy? Oh, we’ve lost our boy.”  
But they should know  
Where you’ve gone  
Because again and again you’ve explained that  
You’re going to...

David’s friends should know why he is gone, and the same will be repeated about David’s mother and David’s father—they all should know why he is gone, since he has explained it again and again, but the song never explains it and we are left ignorant, just as the characters who relate to David. Along with the inability to understand David’s move, there is the ironic fact the only thing coming out of this disco is gibberish and racist chants. There is nothing truly meaningful that could come out of such a place as this disco, since there is nothing meaningful in pretending a relation to a country is based on birth and genetics: a relation to a country is based on the connection to its arts.<sup>29</sup> Morrissey’s concern with references has been shown, ever since *The Smiths*; in that sense, Morrissey’s nationalistic positions are always in connection to a set of particular artistic references, from music to books, plays and films, all made in Britain.

The other song raising issues in the press, “We’ll Let You Know,” is about soccer hooligans. Morrissey has praised it as one of his favorites, enigmatically saying the song “sums everything up.” Simon Goddard, in his entry to the song (470-1), argues that, as “The National Front Disco,” it derives from Bill Buford’s book *Among the Thugs*, a study on soccer hooligans which ends with the conclusion that football hooligans are a result of the disappearance of the British working-class; the generation they sprung from is “bored, empty and, decadent.” Still according to Buford, “it is a lad culture without

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<sup>29</sup> “The more abstract, the more ideal an art is, the more it reveals to us the temper of its age. If we wish to understand a nation by means of its art, let us look at its architecture or its music” (Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” 939).



mystery, so deadened that it uses violence to wake itself up.” Having this in mind, Goddard’s conclusion is to defend that what Morrissey considers to be the “sum of everything” is related to this destruction of the working-class: “This is the crux of ‘We’ll Let You Know,’ not a glorification of jingoistic aggression, but Morrissey’s requiem for the death of his own social class. In this respect it does, indeed, ‘sum everything up somehow’ about who he is and where he comes from” (471). The nostalgia implied in Goddard’s comment derives from the idea Morrissey belongs to working-class; but Bufford explains football hooligans are a result of the dissolution of the working-class, and so to praise them nostalgically as a symbol of that class seems awkward. Goddard’s comment arises from confusion with the use Morrissey is giving to the word “everything”: this song sums everything up in the sense it is the result of a learning process about the art of writing songs. Ever since his estrangement from Johnny Marr, who was responsible for The Smiths’ music, Morrissey had been struggling with the need to be publicly recognized as a good songwriter, not just Marr’s lyricist. In “We’ll Let You Know,” Morrissey’s learning is expressed in the way he establishes a meaningful relation between the lyrics and the musical structure (which includes a section mimicking a soccer crowd chanting). And it is in that sense the song sums everything up, in the way his maturity as a songwriter reaches its peak, marking a new moment in Morrissey’s career (an artistry which would be showcased in what is unanimously referred to as his solo masterpiece from 1994, *Vauxhall and I*).

There is another interesting point to be made about “We’ll Let You Know” and Morrissey’s artistry. If Morrissey is assuming the character of a hooligan, it is very peculiar he is so deprecatory in the assessment of what he does; we usually assume our own faults but we do not usually glorify them as meaningless activities which define us:

We’re all smiles  
Then, honest, I swear, it’s the turnstiles  
That make us hostile  
Oh

We will descend  
On anyone unable to defend  
Themselves.  
Oh

And the songs we sing  
They’re not supposed to mean a thing.  
La, la, la, la

Why would it be plausible for someone to write from the perspective of such characters and openly stating they are worthless? It seems conveying the right perspective was never the issue and this suggests the song is more about Morrissey than about football hooligans. If, as seen through the track list of *Your Arsenal*, the choice of subjects for the songs denounces Morrissey's personal anxieties, the way he works those subjects continually imprints his presence even when singing from a character's point of view. In true Wildean fashion, Morrissey's characters are not justified by their relation to reality but by the author being who he is. As Wilde puts it, "What is true in a man's life is not what he does, but the legend which grows around him... You must never destroy legends. Through them we are given an inkling of the true physiognomy of a man" (Wilde quoted in Ellman 44).

In "The Decay of Lying," Wilde puts forward the defense of Shakespeare as someone who did not believe art depicts life. Vivian is reading the article on the aesthetic nature of lying and is referring to the moment when Hamlet says, in Act III, scene 2, that the art of drama consists in holding a mirror to nature, thus implying the best art reflects nature. At this point Cyril interrupts Vivian's reading to ask for a cigarette. Believing Cyril's request for a cigarette holds an objection to the argument, as if saying Shakespeare's art cannot be contested, Vivian interrupts the reading to defend his argument:

Vivian: [...] "They [critics] will call upon Shakespeare—they always do—and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters."

Cyril: Ahem! Another cigarette, please.

Vivian: My dear fellow, whatever you may say, it is merely a dramatic utterance, and no more represents Shakespeare's real views upon art than the speeches of Iago represent his real views upon morals. (Wilde, 932-3)

To the apparent objection raised to the argument, Vivian answers with belief, not with empiric arguments about Shakespeare. It is in the nature of all that Shakespeare did that such an unrefined concept of art should not be but a mere dramatic utterance within the play, serving only the interest of the play itself. There is a religious nature in this kind of assumption; as Davie's position on the authority deriving from some men, the relationship one establishes with some artists is, in fact, of a religious nature. This means we do not relate to objects of art, as many critics believe, only by the nature of their form and style; we relate to them through the idea of an author, because we believe these objects build up an image of their author.

Morrissey, commenting on the attraction the soccer player George Best held over the soccer crowds and how that relationship changed people's perception of soccer, states: "Demonstrating the life of success, Best is of course penalized for enjoying too much, yet he is a revolution effecting overwhelming change on how sport is viewed because he is blatantly contemptuous of the press and of governing sporting associations whilst also, incidentally, being an extraordinary player" (Morrissey 27). Morrissey is wrong in his evaluation of Best's relevance: he was not an extraordinary player "incidentally"—it is precisely because he was such an extraordinary player that his behavior outside the pitch was so relevant; it was not expected a soccer player could have such performances while having such a bohemian lifestyle (it was the behavior of artists and his performances in the pitch were often described having in mind the tones of artistry set by said lifestyle). In the same measure, it is continuously surprising that Morrissey, having achieved such a status as a pop music star, does not indulge in the kind of behaviors other pop stars have. His assessment of a performance is not limited to the aspects of that performance—it is closely connected to the performer. The idea there is a straight line separating who one is and what one does is preposterous. Morrissey's work depends on the coherence of the image it gives of its author and so one can easily understand any idea about racism would be unreasonable, it would not belong with the author's personality; if such a claim would be put forward by Morrissey himself it would result in a change of his previous work and of his personality. He would be a different artist, its nature and the set of beliefs associated with him would be different, and so would be the readings of his songs.

## The Feeling of Emptiness

In 2012, Will Oldham published a book of interviews with Alan Licht, *Will Oldham on Bonnie 'Prince' Billy*, where he addressed several issues around his pseudonym, Bonnie 'Prince' Billy. Will Oldham begun recording music in the early 1990s under several names, such as Palace Music, Palace Brothers, or just Palace; between 1996 and 1998 he went through a creative crisis which led him to reconsider the way he wrote music. As a consequence of that crisis Oldham created the pseudonym he still edits under. The album *I See a Darkness*, from 1999, marked the first appearance of the pseudonym as the author of a full album. In Licht's book, Oldham describes the period before Bonnie came about in this way:

At the time I started to make Bonnie Prince Billy records, there was an acceptance that something that would be on the table then would be—I didn't necessarily know what it meant—a relationship with identity. That having your person and/or your work absorbed by people who had no access to any other part of you was inherent in being involved in the arts and the natural tendency for people, whether or not they wanted or needed to, to fill out the character, fill out the person, fill out the life. [...] On some level there's the relationship of the audience to the identity, but I didn't want that to be the theme, to where's super-reflexive and that's what the content is about—it seemed like that would be a dead end—but to understand that I could have the relationship and see if it translated or not. (Oldham 4)

The pseudonym was a mechanism of self-defense from the audience's and the critics' harassment about the materials making up the songs, continually described as biographic details of the author's life, even when they were just stories told from a character's perspective. The birth of Bonnie was an attempt to clarify the juxtaposition between what the songs' materials were and what the author's real life was; part of the concern about the creation of such a defense mechanism was not to make it a theme in itself but to create a character behaving as a real person and one he could attribute the usual claims one makes about artists to—the aim, one might imply, was to create life.

Prior to the edition of *I See a Darkness*, Oldham had released two albums already denoting a problem with the attribution of authorship: *Arise Therefore* (1996), an album where there was no reference to the author, whether a band or a single person, and *Joya* (1997), which was attributed to Will Oldham.<sup>30</sup> Referring to them, Oldham says: “Those two records were beginning to show, to myself and whoever was listening, that an

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<sup>30</sup> Will Oldham's prolific career makes it hard to trace all his releases, particularly the smaller releases of singles and EP's; other albums, singles, and EP's were attributed to Will Oldham around this period, probably until 2004 (*Seafarers of Music*).

identity was a default mode of thinking, both for the singer and for the audience, but they were different and that was problematic, it was an unexpected dilemma” (132). The question which kept coming around had to do with the mixing of songs’ facts and real life’s facts; it was hard to dissociate the “I” of the performer from the “I” of the author, bringing about an anxiety concerning the kind of materials used in the songs, which was translated in the uneasiness as to the authorship of the creative work he was doing.

The epiphany which gave way to the birth of Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy had already been documented in several interviews and was expanded in the conversations with Alan Licht: during a flight from Australia to the United States, Oldham finally understood the anxiety he felt about his position as a songwriter might be mitigated if there were a kind of middle man the questions about the songs could be traced back to. The pseudonym could allow for a bigger distance between author and performer, safeguarding Oldham’s private life: “Will Oldham has a private life, and Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy doesn’t” (136). Beyond the mere protection of privacy, the pseudonym should represent a blank slate to start from, to recreate everything Oldham understood as part of being a songwriter and performer. The name of the pseudonym, for instance, had the appeal of meaninglessness, as if Oldham felt the need for the absence of possible relations, or even of a personal history, as if that could in any way restrain the writing process:

Licht: The ‘Bonnie Prince Billy’ name was conceived on the flight home from a January 1998 Australian tour you did with Liam Hayes, Mick and Jim. You’ve said that name is like Nat King Cole or Bonnie Prince Charlie... and even driving around in Louisville, I keep seeing ‘Bonny’ this and that.

Oldham: Yeah, there’s a neighbourhood called Bonnycastle, there’s Bonneville, things like that... At the time, that’s what I thought of. The obvious thing, which I know that I knew, didn’t even occur to me, which is that Billy Bonney was Billy the Kid.

Licht: Your publishing company is Royal Stable, so ‘Prince’...

Oldham: Yeah, it fit. It was a very practical thing. I was overjoyed because it sounded nice and also had a relationship to what had come before. Bonnie Prince Billy is such a ridiculous name. It had no preconceptions to it; nobody could say what the music was going to be like on hearing the name. But it turned the music into an individual, which seemed to be what everyone—the audience, or at least the people that I was forced to talk to about the music—was seeking. (Oldham 135-6)

Building a character does not entail, according to Oldham, a kind of mimetic predisposition towards reality and the ridiculous name suffices in order to accomplish the goals Oldham has set for the pseudonym; the difficulty was in combining this lack of background with the need to have the pseudonym behave as a real person. While the absence of expectations seemed to work as an advantage point for creating songs there was the feeling Bonnie was lacking something; this was extended as other unexpected problems had to be addressed in order to give this new person the necessary credibility so that he could exist and perform his main purpose, which was to answer for a certain

body of work. So, although in hindsight the epiphany seems to have been a complete achievement, there was still a path to walk between the creation of the pseudonym and the complete awareness of how it could function and of what his potentialities were. (A demonstration of that difficult path is laid out by looking at Oldham's discography of this period, where one can find releases attributed to Bonny Billy or Bonnie "Blue" Billy.) Oldham is aware of the hardships when he notes: "with *I See a Darkness* and the singles that were recorded around then we were mapping Bonnie's genetic code. Once that was done he could live, like a monster... a second birth" (143). The perception of this difficulty in creating a character is probably best reflected by the fact *Joya* (1997) was later reissued not as a Will Oldham album but as a Bonnie 'Prince' Billy album, showing the concern about the authorship of the songs precedes the epiphany he had in that flight from Australia: just as the anxiety about creating songs did not appear by magic, so to the solution did not come by with the answers all written down.

The concerns and difficulties involved in the creation of Bonnie 'Prince' Billy can still be felt in *Ease Down the Road* (2001), the album that was, at the time, Bonnie's second; and they seem particularly apparent in "Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness," a song built as an autobiography and a way of explaining the process which led to the creation of the pseudonym. Oldham, referring to the recording of that album, admits he was consciously "trying to come up with Bonnie 'Prince' Billy and his whole universe" (146). Unsurprisingly, then, the biography described in "Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness" seems peculiar in the sense it starts from the idea the narrator feels as if he "was born today," as sung in the first line; this notion of being born a second time, of a rebirth, echoes Oldham's description to Licht about the coming about of the pseudonym and it is particularly distressing if one notes the simile Oldham uses: he could live "like a monster." In "Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness," the first part of the song is then a tale of how the narrator arrived at that particular feeling which allowed for rebirth, detailing the dissolution of the narrator into nothingness:

Well I felt like I was born today  
So I took it upon me to go away  
To gather my thoughts and go away  
To where I could (be used by) somebody.  
Over the hill, like always you know  
Were Billy and Frankie and Henry and Joe  
And they beat and broke me hard and slow  
To prove I was nobody.  
And no-one I was and so I remained  
Knocked-out in a hut, no mother, no name,  
And filled up my heart with one and the same

That grand dark feeling of emptiness.

Emphasis is put upon the idea of being nobody, of reaching a state where all marks of identity are gone; this is noticeable not only in the line which gives title to the song but also in the parenthesis of the fourth line (a textual mark that requires the reading of the lyrics in the album's booklet so its particular resonance can be understood). Just the use of the parenthesis should be startling enough to make one feel the amount of thought poured into writing this song—an aspect one should not dismiss.

At this point we reach a division in the song marked by the vocal delivery of the line the title is sung in, with the enunciation of each word as a separate item; what follows is the description of a new biography:

And was it a friend that turned me loose?  
Or was it a girl come to baste my goose?  
Or was it my great god who laid on his finger  
And started my clock anew?  
Ah no, it was rain; ah no, it was gunning  
It was point-break and buckle  
And singing and cunning  
That skinned me, re-skinned me  
And started me running  
And I never looked back from then on.

The three questions posed in the first four lines refer to the idea a new biography might be the result of a particular epiphany or of a divine act; the negative answer gives way to the description of that biography as the outcome of life's hardships (from the "rain," "gunning," and "point-break and buckle") and of work (from the "singing" and "cunning"). This last notion, of the biography being the result of the singing and cunning is particularly interesting in the sense it points towards the field in which this biography is constructed: the songs. As the song enters a third section, marked by the introduction of a second male voice, a consideration is made about the process of learning: "And now I am learning bit by bit / About the make and model shit"; the reference here is to the writing of songs or, at least, to a new way of writing songs: if singing and cunning had led to this point, a new life requires learning the proper way of doing such things—a new life requires new methods.

The stanza ends again with the fear of not having enough humanness to exist; the little humanness left, once divided, will amount only to a worm or virus, meaning there was not much humanness to begin with:

And I'm afeared if I don't have  
A piglet, lamb, or little calve  
I'll chop my human-ness in half  
And be as worm or virus.

Here I want to note the paradox in the fact this new life causes no new human being from the process of cleansing but a “worm” or a “virus”; the argument is that the fear of not owning such items as the animals enumerated, of physically not being able to own them, might give way to a lesser existence. The physical inability to own such animals is in contrast with the metaphysical existence described in the first four lines of the next stanza:

Kids I've had, and they are sung  
Upon folks' ears my babes are hung  
Rhythmically they live among  
And grow but don't get old.

One ends up with a human being who admits to being like a worm or virus and yet is able to describe himself as someone who has had a full life, with kids and love interests;<sup>31</sup> it is true the life he describes exists only rhythmically, that is, it exists only in songs, but that seems enough. This lack of humanness is in line with a pseudonym in the sense he has only the life of the songs to exist in, he “has no real existence” (136); the life of hard facts is inaccessible to him as Oldham admits to Licht when describing how the audiences should interact with the pseudonym during tours: “the idea is that re-entering the same basic character space of somebody who is also ageing and maturing but in a non-human way” (136).

The consideration one has to make about the creation of this pseudonym is that from the beginning Oldham became aware that just coming up with a name was not enough. Oldham recognizes writing songs through Bonnie sets him “free to write in the first person by becoming disembodied and writing from this other first person that *did* exist, but only in the abstract” (144). Throughout the experiences with the several pseudonyms, and with his own name, what Oldham comes to realize is that the pseudonym, much like a human being, requires a biography in order for his work to be understood. The biography can only be built through the songs and what “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness” is referring to is exactly that: one can have an existence merely through the songs, but a biography is an immediate requirement if one is to understand

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<sup>31</sup> In the CD booklet, the stanza is introduced by the adversative “but,” which is not used in the actual song; the textual mark implies that while physicality is not possible there is, nonetheless, an alternative.



the song; for the listener, for the audience, the existence is built through the songs and those songs immediately become the biography. In that sense, this song is simultaneously building the story of a character, and acknowledging his existence depends on the song itself.

The earlier reference to the process of learning thus becomes part of the new life, as it is part of the pseudonym's biography; the pseudonym must be separated from the author not only by the name but also by his approach to song writing. "Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness" exposes itself as a result of a different life in the use of different techniques, each one overemphasized as if part of the meaning of the song was to acknowledge the use of such techniques. One of the techniques is shown in the way the rhyme is forced in the four lines following the ones just quoted:

Not in a box, not in a void  
Not if their voice is never hoid  
Nor if no-one repeats a woid  
But if their tune is told.

The narrator had already recognized he was now learning about "the make and model shit" and this is a showing of that learning: changing the words "heard" to "hoid" and "word" to "woid" to keep the rhyme with "void." The forced rhymes seem to call attention to the technique of fitting words to the overall scheme of the song and reveal within the song the will of the narrator to show what he is now learning in order to become himself. Another technique is the introduction of the second male voice when the reference to learning about models and techniques is made (which is, itself, a way of calling attention to the line); this voice will linger on, slightly off tempo, until the song gets to the last four lines. A third voice, a female voice, is introduced in the line "Kids I've had, and they are sung"; this voice will also be off tempo and it will disappear before the last four lines are sung. The dissonance created by the three voices is aimed at emphasizing the different tone of those last four lines, lines showcasing other techniques: for one, the semantic field is changed from the one preceding it, introducing words like "golden," "starlight," or "gold" to contrast with the semantic bleakness preceding these lines; with the disappearance of the two dissonant voices, and with the change in the delivery, the melodic structure seems more evident than before and the last four lines sound completely different from what precedes them:

Then we can age and fall away  
Meet again some golden day  
And fill it in our happy way

In starlight and in gold.

The ending of the song thus becomes a moment of harmony where the plea for union is made in a complete different tone from the one used in the previous description. Suddenly, the “I” of the song is turned into a “we,” which although technically separated, refers to hopes of reunion in a brighter future. I believe the claim might be made that this ending is a reference to the cohabitation of Oldham and his pseudonym, in the sense the latter will exist through the songs, through the rhythmical repetition of the songs by the public; once Bonnie’s songs become part of the world, from the moment they are repeated as *his* songs, then author and pseudonym can coexist peacefully.

Commenting the ending of the song with Licht, particularly on the use of the synthesizer, Oldham says:

[The synthesizer] was supposed to be more like a punchline, just 'cause the song... part of the objective, with Bonnie Prince Billy, was to fill the light into the songs, sort of in an Addams Family kind of way, or Misfits/Samhain where there's all this very apparent morbidity and darkness and unpleasantness and power and all that, but it's being brought to you by people who get a fair amount of joy out of it. (Oldham 164)

Part of the process of making songs as Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy is a way of introducing light into the songs in order to make it clear they are made by someone who enjoys making them; even when the song is about something sad the joy of making a song must be evident: “You don’t write a harrowing song because you want to be harrowing all the time but because it feels good” (164). The most obvious example of this point is the lightness of a song as “Ease Down the Road,” where the surprise is not only the upbeat music but also the quality of the voice; where Oldham’s voice was once an “eerie, strangulated voice, half wild and half broken” (Sanneh), he now makes an effort to actually sing in a more melodious way. “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness” represents in practice the move towards a future with more light not only in the words which are sung but also in the way the musical structure is built; in that sense, the move forward is construed by the description and by the implied techniques used in that description—it is through the song and the techniques used in it that Bonnie expresses his existence.

## Darkness Before the Light

In “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness,” light was the result of the happy coexistence between Will Oldham and Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy; but to have a peaceful coexistence with his pseudonym and let the light in, there had to be a moment of darkness to overcome. In a passage already quoted, Will Oldham expresses his belief about people’s need and want to “fill out the character, fill out the person, fill out the life” of the singer as a “natural tendency”; Oldham is convinced “having your person and/or your work absorbed by people who had no access to any other part of you was inherent in being involved in the arts” (Oldham 4). How was it then that Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy came to be understood by his audiences? His first full album, *I See a Darkness*, was not so different from Oldham’s prior albums it could simply represent a turning point by itself; in that sense, the pseudonym was just another name as the band’s names had been in the beginning of his recording career. One of the unexpected difficulties Oldham mentions about the creation of the pseudonym has to do with the lack of substance Bonnie had: “The alter ego is somebody that has no background, has no childhood, has no real existence” (134). As seen with “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness,” existence could be managed through the songs since his biography is dependent, and concomitant, with them. The question at stake here is that there were still no songs one could refer back to and so, adding to the lack of physical existence, Bonnie had also a lack of metaphysical existence. Understanding a song (or a poem, as discussed previously) without an author is a mere language game we indulge in as human beings—we require a bulk of work we can look at in search of patterns. That is probably why Oldham speaks, regarding the making of *Ease Down the Road*, of the necessity of endowing Bonnie with an universe: “I think it was just using the same language: especially for that record, I was trying to come up with Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy and his whole universe, and the universe had to have a spoken language, so I was trying to be consistent from song to song with this language” (146).

But what relevance does it have for a pseudonym to have an existence? I believe without the biography songs have no special meaning and become prey to the relativistic position stating a text is built in by its readers. The critic E. D. Hirsch notes:

A word sequence means nothing in particular until somebody either means something by it or understands something from it. There is no magic land of meanings outside human consciousness.

Whenever meaning is connected to words, a person is making the connection, and the particular meanings he lends to them are never the only legitimate ones under the norms and conventions of his language. (Hirsch Jr. 4)

The particular meanings we lend to certain words are not the only legitimate ones within the conventions of our language, but they can be more or less legitimate within particular contexts and, especially, when spoken by certain people. Literary interpretation is naturally a fickle field in terms of the attribution of meaning to words; problems with the ascription of meaning are not, nonetheless, confined to literary interpretation and are part of our daily dwellings, even when one is not aware of them. If it is true professional literary interpreters often make the mistake of believing their work extends over everything and everything should be interpreted as literature, some of the problems relating to that particular field should not be dismissed. An obvious question is how one is constantly performing complex interpretative acts without realizing it; many linguistic acts are performed without recourse to words (facial expressions, gestures, or tones might have more meaning than words) and so the act of understanding another human being's speech requires more than verbal knowledge—it might require an idea of who that human being is and how he usually behaves. We frequently do not have difficulties understanding other human beings because we are not constantly tempted to doubt what we hear although we are probably more suspicious when hearing someone for the first time. Most of this understanding is not part of a conscious process but an inbuilt way learnt through life about how people behave and what they mean when they use certain words in particular tones or accompanied by specific gestures.

In 2009, in a Will Oldham profile written for *The New Yorker*, Kelefa Sanneh describes the song “I See a Darkness” in the following manner: “It’s a solemn song, but the homely lyrics tug against the prophetic tone of the title: ‘Well, I hope that someday, buddy, we have peace in our lives / Together or apart, alone or with our wives.’ Part of the thrill was the feeling—however illusory—that, for once, you knew exactly what Oldham was talking about.” The cautionary warning about the illusion of understanding what the song is about is very interesting: it implies the true meaning of the song is hidden behind a more obvious meaning. The claim I will make is that that hidden meaning is only possible to disclose in hindsight, as it was with Joy Division’s *Closer* and with Ian Curtis’ suicide, when a biography can supplement the meaning of certain words, a problem most obviously addressed in the song giving title to Bonnie’s first album, “I See a Darkness.” In that song, Oldham specifically addresses the need for the pseudonym to have an independent existence from its creator, to be as similar to a

human being as possible; as seen in “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness,” the goal for a happy coexistence in the future requires first that author and pseudonym have a different existence, and it is precisely this need at the core of “I See a Darkness.”<sup>32</sup> Echoing Hirsch’s position about magical realms where words have rigid meanings, Oldham explains: “Magic words like “love” or “God” or “death” could mean a thousand different things, and if you want to write a song that’s about something more than a thousand things, you can begin by assuming that every way of jamming words together can be as literal as you desire and still be taken in a different way by every listener” (6). The word “darkness” can easily figure in the list of magic words Oldham is referring to; the magic nature of such words comes from their different uses and regardless of what they might mean, there is a familiarity to them which is comforting, as Sanneh points out. As Oldham notes, for those words to have a specific meaning they require a context, such as the one provided by a biography; in Bonnie’s case, the existence of a biography (a bulk of songs) would only come after the first record and so the dormant meaning of the song could only be perceived in hindsight.

I think the most noticeable aspect of Bonnie’s first appearance lies precisely in the title of the album, a very odd statement for an introduction, and one should wonder why his first appearance is made under such a lugubrious title. What is the nature of the “darkness” Bonnie sees? I believe the title is referring precisely to Bonnie’s lack of metaphysical existence, to the inexistence of a universe one could refer back to in order to understand the songs. Focusing on the song, Oldham explains:

I had a friend who was in a somewhat confusing point in his life, wrestling with ideas of creativity as well as addiction. The voice of the singer imposes upon that person—the object of the song—a kind of hope or an assumption that that person will rise and keep rising. It’s an entreaty or prayer that as that person rises, he or she will have the strength in hindsight to carry the singer up with him or her. (Oldham 145)

It is obviously striking that someone describes a friend’s problematic period by starting to point out creativity problems and only afterwards problems with addiction: the hierarchy of these problems seems peculiar. It is also unusual to state the writing of the song is not inspired by the friend’s problems but that it is written as a therapeutic procedure. Songs have, in many people’s descriptions, healing properties, particularly in what concerns certain psychological moods; but that is not what Oldham’s description seems to address—it is hoped the song itself will lift the addressee. More striking even is

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<sup>32</sup> In a certain sense, it is as if “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness” were an answer to the problems raised by the earlier song.

Oldham's expectation the song, by lifting its addressee, will carry the singer along with it, an eccentricity made more relevant by the fact the lifting of the singer is done retrospectively, not simultaneously. I think all this oddness becomes clear if we understand the song to be a plea by Bonnie to Oldham himself; if we understand that the friend experiencing creativity problems is Oldham, then the song is an attempt to release him from the difficulties associated with the process of creating songs, a process that by Oldham's own descriptions was becoming harder. In his interviews with Licht, curiously enough, the idea to stop writing does not come up, as if the act of writing were a kind of addiction—to the point it was easier to produce an album without reference to the author, as with *Arise Therefore*, than to just not produce at all.

The explanation of the song given by Oldham is not the only peculiarity in "I See a Darkness"; peculiarities expand to the lyrics and to their structure, beginning with the first four lines, where the second and fourth are noted as parenthetical in the album's booklet. Oldham explains:

Licht: In the CD's lyric booklet, the second and fourth lines of the song are in parentheses. Was that something that you had thought of as being parenthetical, or was it just when you were writing it out that seemed parenthetical?

Oldham: Yeah, it seemed parenthetical, and the way we do it live now is how I imagined it. I will sing the first line and Emmet [Kelly] will sing the second line, and then I'll sing the third line and he'll sing the fourth line. And from then on I sing the lyric, but for some reason, even though the point of view doesn't change, I've always thought of it as an answer line. (Oldham 145-6)

It seems relevant to note how, while thought as answering lines, the parenthetical lines do not entice a change in the point of view—who is answering whom, if the point of view does not change? The rebuilding of the song in future performances to accommodate a second voice seems a consequence of Bonnie's maturing, as if throughout the years he had acquired an autonomy which at that point he still did not have:

Well you're my friend  
(It's what you told me)  
And can you see  
(What's inside of me)

The song is actually referring to the need of separating the pseudonym from the author, in the sense their simultaneous existence carries complications (such as parenthetical answers). Robert Langbaum, discussing the relation one establishes with poetry, notes how "the lyrical characterization manifests an area of existence outside the poem,

sympathy being the means by which we apprehend such an area—we supply it with our own existence” (201). Introducing our own experience into a poem is a natural reaction when reading poetry; Oldham explains how in music the problem might be emphasized by using one’s own voice: “Any first person lyric, and just the use of the voice, is very tricky, not just for the listener but also probably for most performers, because one of the main reasons one does it is because of the appeal of inhabiting a persona and a voice. But once you commit to that, you don’t know the effect it’s gonna have” (7). Extricating Oldham from Bonnie seems to be a necessary action towards the survival not only of Oldham but mainly of the pseudonym: it is, ultimately, an act of preservation.

Moving along the song, if we take its addressee to be Oldham, it also appears easier to understand the final lines of the first stanza, where the adversative introducing the last four lines seems uncalled for in relation to the four lines preceding it:

Well you know I have a love  
A love for everyone I know  
And you know I have a drive  
To live I won’t let go  
But can you see it’s opposition  
Comes a-rising up sometimes  
That it’s dreadful and position  
Comes blacking in my mind

In what sense are the love for everyone and the drive to live in any way opposites? I think they are opposites in the sense that in the position Bonnie occupies love is a possibility, because it is a feeling, while the idea of living cannot be accomplished if not metaphysically; that is why “position” blacks his mind because of the opposition between all the metaphysical possibilities and the hard facts of the life he aspires to. Articulating the song as a plea from Bonnie to Oldham, it is possible to understand the refrain as articulating the hope the pseudonym can be loved by Oldham, in that manner guaranteeing its survival. The idea is reinforced by the repetition of the pronoun “you” as a kind of echo in the penultimate line:

And that I see a darkness  
And that I see a darkness  
And that I see a darkness  
And that I see a darkness  
And did you know how much I love you  
Is a hope that somehow you you  
Can save me from this darkness.

It is this reinforced “you” who will save the singer from darkness, and my proposal is that, being a reference to Oldham, it will do so by nurturing Bonnie, by loving him and carrying him, literally, through life. Further on, in the last line of the second stanza, this “you” will be referred to as “my best unbeaten brother” and that is also an allusion to Oldham’s inevitable presence, no matter how independent the pseudonym becomes. In the last stanza, we have a glimpse at the desire expressed in the last lines of “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness,” treated as a desire for the future:

Well I hope that someday, buddy  
We have peace in our lives  
Together or apart  
Alone or with our wives  
That we can stop our whoring  
And pull the smiles inside  
And light it up forever  
And never go to sleep  
My best unbeaten brother  
This isn’t all I see

Images of the future are a possibility for the pseudonym, but they are not all he sees; the last refrain changes its relation with the last line of the stanza preceding it: while between the first stanza and the refrain the relation was an addition, “And that I see a darkness,” in the last refrain the relation is of opposition, “O no I see a darkness.” Beyond all the metaphysical possibilities, there still needs to be a physical verification for the pseudonym to have an existence—that physical verification are the songs. So, remembering the grand feeling of emptiness is qualified, later on, by the adjective “dark,” one can presuppose the darkness this song refers to is Bonnie’s empty existence, his lack of songs. (In the last stanza of “Grand Dark Feeling of Emptiness” the future is marked by a semantic stress on light implying an end for darkness.)

In Johnny Cash’s autobiography, *Cash: The Autobiography*, the 1980s appear as an unkind period, when despite many tours and concerts he became “invisible” (17, 262). In opposition, the 1990s would bring Cash recognition, along with a return to the charts; according to his own assessment, this recognition so late in his career was due to a renewal of his audiences, supported by the interest younger musicians showed in his work. The interest was aroused by the series of albums Cash recorded with producer Rick Rubin, *American Recordings*. The first album of the series, edited in 1994, was constructed by a mixture of old songs, new songs and covers including Leonard Cohen or Tom Waits. Cash was convinced the sudden interest in his career was due to his association, through the covers, with musicians not only younger than himself but mainly



with different musical backgrounds. To follow the success of the first record, Cash released the second volume, *Unchained*, in 1996; again, the album featured some of his songs, but introduced a bigger number of covers. While in 1994 he had played alone, for this album Tom Petty and The Heartbreakers were his support band, and the results seemed to have a smaller impact than when he was alone with his guitar. The following volume, *Solitary Man*, was edited in 2000, after Cash had been diagnosed with Parkinson; it is hard to look at the track list for this album, consisting again of a mixture of Cash's originals and covers, and not to think of how death was on Cash's mind when he recorded it. While *Unchained* featured unexpected covers from performers as Beck or Soundgarden, where one could imagine the choice had more to do with the improbability of putting Cash and those performers together, in this third volume the choice of covers seems more thematically oriented towards the theme crossing the whole album—death. This being so, one is not surprised to find covers of Nick Cave (“Mercy Seat”) or of Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy (“I See a Darkness”).

How did Cash find his way to Bonnie ‘Prince’ Billy? In the late 1990s, Drag City, Oldham's record label at the time, asked Oldham to compile the lyrics from Palace Music's *Viva Last Blues* for Johnny Cash was interested in recording a cover for his next album; Oldham complied and heard nothing more about it for a while. About a year later, Oldham learned, through a friend of Rubin's, Cash was preparing to record “I See a Darkness.” Oldham, decided to be a part of the recording, found his way to Rubin and got invited to play the piano in Cash's cover; Oldham naturally accepted the invitation, even though he did not play the piano, eager as he was to be part of the recording session. On the day of the actual recording, forced to reveal his inability with the piano, he got asked to do backing vocals. In that same session, Oldham was introduced to Cash's wife, June Carter, and she told him how Cash arrived at “I See a Darkness”; she recalled the couple were in their Jamaican property and Cash was hearing *I See a Darkness* in search of a song to cover when, passing by, she heard the song and immediately said Cash had to record it. The other choice for a cover was “Death to Everyone,” apparently by Rubin's suggestion (Oldham 149-51); Cash went with his wife's suggestion. What I want to underline from this story is that both Rubin and Carter had a precise idea about the songs which best fit Cash since both suggestions would suit Cash's personality as if they had been written by himself.

Cash's cover of “I See a Darkness” is stripped of all the peculiarities noted about Bonnie's song; the second and the fourth lines were eliminated and the repetition of the

pronoun “you” in the penultimate line of the refrain is gone. Clear of these peculiarities, one should expect the song as described by Oldham, a song about friendship, would be clearer. Had the song been performed by Cash in the 1950s or 1960s, that would have been a strong possibility; but this song is sung by an elderly Cash and what he is singing about is not the emptiness “darkness” referred to in Bonnie’s song; Cash is singing about death, his own death. This change in the meaning of “darkness” is not just a consequence of the changes introduced by Cash, it is a consequence of Cash’s presence: what else could “darkness” mean in Cash’s language? Words do not have the magical capacity of having all possible meanings when sung by Cash; it is not that Cash has fewer magical powers than anyone else, it is just a contingency of having four decades of songs as his biography. Cash’s biography does not allow for too much fluctuation in the meaning of certain words and when one listens to Cash one has the idea of who he is, even if one’s knowledge of his past is not very extensive. The singer’s definition in his autobiography seems clear:

It was my second major comeback; the minor ones have been too many to count. I’m still on the circuit today, still recording, still writing songs, still showing up to play everywhere from Midwestern auditoriums to Manhattan trend spots to the Royal Albert Hall.

I’m in reasonable shape physically and financially. I’m still a Christian, as I have been all my life.

Beyond that I get complicated. I endorse Kris Kristofferson’s line about me: “He’s a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction.” (Cash 9)

The contradiction Kristofferson is alluding to refers to the distance between who Cash is in private and the public image he has, between what is true (private) and what is fiction (public); most of the fiction, one supposes, comes from the songs. In any case, what is noteworthy is that, as Sanneh mentioned when describing Bonnie’s song, one feels comfortable when one believes to be understanding what is sung; in Cash the comfort is not illusory, it is precise. Cash did not see beyond the simple meaning—there was no need; that is why all the peculiarities are removed—Cash was happy to sing about something he understood and could relate to, without any need to add more complexity.

## Notes on Preservation

Ray Davies' particular concern with preservation comes as a way of understanding the changes his life went through with The Kinks' success and how his view of the world changed from then on; it was an attempt to turn his personal anxieties into manifestations of the external world, much like Donald Davie's account of the relation between "nature poetry" and human feelings. What I want to question is if there is any difference between preservation of the external world and self-preservation. *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society* (1968) is a very hard proof of how the two worlds, the inner and the external world, are very closely related. The album starts with "The Village Green Preservation Society," a song listing all things which should be preserved, either old or new—the main point being that everything requires some sort of society for its defense:

We are the Draught Beer Preservation Society,  
God save Mrs. Mopp and good Old Mother Riley.  
We are the Custard Pie Appreciation Consortium,  
God save the George Cross and all those who were awarded them.  
We are the Sherlock Holmes English Speaking Vernacular,  
Help save Fu Manchu, Moriarty and Dracula.  
We are the Office Block Persecution Affinity,  
God save little shops, china cups and virginity.  
We are the Skyscraper Condemnation Affiliate,  
God save Tudor houses, antique tables and billiards.  
Preserving the old ways from being abused  
Protecting the new ways for me and for you  
What more can we do?  
God save the Village Green.

For all its comic enumerations, there is a sour note in the tone, as if preserving everything was somehow an absurdity. Further on in the album, the song "Village Green" induces a new reading on this first song, since its perfect pastoral landscape is built upon a kind of nostalgia missing in the former. The nostalgic feeling in "Village Green" is not, naturally, concerning the external world but the individual's own past; one might assume this sudden urge for preservation does not have a social concern attached to it, but it relates to a belief that if the external world changes then the inner world changes with it and so puts its existence at risk.

Looking back on Davies' descriptions of his youth, one finds it hard to believe the story told in "Village Green" has anything to do with the singer; in fact, when Davies

states “suburbia was and would always be a major influence in my writing” (Davies, *X-Ray* 266), one has no difficulty in believing, particularly when Davies’ songs are filled with references to characters engaged in social class movements or with criticism to characters happy to be stuck in their middle-class lives. “Village Green” is a different sort of song. Davies does not attempt a precise reconstruction of the past through a neo-realistic approach; on the contrary, he creates a pastoral fiction, already immersed in metaphors, about kissing a girl named Daisy (of all names) by an old oak tree. Davies’ Village Green is far removed from a London suburb or from the places where he grew up:

Out in the country,  
Far from all the soot and noise of the city,  
There’s a village green.  
It’s been a long time  
Since I last set eyes on the church with the steeple  
Down by the village green.  
’Twas there I met a girl called Daisy  
And kissed her by the old oak tree.  
Although I loved my Daisy, I sought fame,  
And so I left the village green.

We can dismiss this as a kind of pastoral longing many writers indulge in, but if we understand Davies’ way of dealing with songwriting, we may realize that the “motivation” for leaving Village Green is autobiographical (“I sought fame”) and from that “motivation” we can suspect all else in the song is related to his real life:

I even stopped drawing, because I realized that drawing was too truthful. I could tell lies in my little songs because in many ways my style had been my own invention and my subconscious was allowed to work through me and yet somehow bypass the listener: I could keep the secrets of my motivation completely to myself. The strange thing was that my songs were being heard all over the world by millions of people and yet nobody really knew what these songs were really about. On the other hand, my artwork had always been more specific and all my subliminal thoughts were displayed in my pictures. There seemed to be something more subversive about writing songs. The fact that they were part of popular culture, considered vulgar, appealed to me after the pretentious allusions of art school. There was something dishonest about the way we were being told to paint: it was an education in style rather than painting or craftsmanship. (Davies, *X-Ray* 196-7)

The possibility of hiding things in songs is what attracts Davies to music, as if all depended on subversively writing about one’s own life. His objections to how he was being taught to paint are a reflection of how he believed it was through his style, and not precisely through his descriptions, that he said things.<sup>33</sup> In the end, honesty is not related to correct depictions of reality, but with how certain narratives are told; those narratives

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<sup>33</sup> This is not very different from the technical assessment Donald Davie makes of Larkin’s poetry.

can illustrate some feelings, even refer to specific events, but only referentially, since the true subjects addressed are kept undisclosed (they are hiding beneath a more obvious meaning).

If one notes “Village Green” was first recorded in 1966 and released as a single in 1967, a year before the release of *The Kinks Are the Village Green Preservation Society*, one can add a touch of cynicism to the comic enumerations of “The Village Green Preservation Society”: if everything is worth preserving, what has real value? Is a song worth preserving? Apparently so, if we are to look at this song’s history; maybe it happens that, in a rapidly changing world, everything should be preserved for it is at risk of being lost. In that sense, keeping in mind songs illustrate feelings or specific events, they should naturally be preserved exactly in the same shape as they were created; they are evidence one has existed and so reason enough to keep around since they tell our history. It is probably because of the need to preserve evidence of our history that in “People Take Pictures of Each Other,” a song from the same album, pictures are used as further evidence events really took place, since, as it was seen, songs depict events in a distorted way and thus serve as poorer evidence:

People take pictures of the Summer,  
Just in case someone thought they had missed it,  
Just to prove that it really existed.  
People take pictures of each other,  
And the moment to last them for ever,  
Of the time when they mattered to someone.  
Picture of me when I was just three,  
Sat with my ma by the old oak tree.  
Oh how I love things as they used to be,  
Don’t show me no more, please.

The old oak tree reappears as an assurance the narrative within the album is plausible; but the relevant point is how the nostalgic feeling for the past denotes the fear a change in that world can result in the destruction of the author’s personality. “Last of the Steam Powered Trains,” another song from the album, makes reference to the difficulty of dissociating the continual changes in society with the losing of identity when Davies admits to be living in a museum—a life through songs, as stated before, includes the living between characters, spaces, music, and narratives from the past:<sup>34</sup>

I’m the last of the good old renegades.  
All my friends are all middle class and grey,

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<sup>34</sup> In *Americana*, Davies goes as far as admitting that “some of my songs are sometimes better company than real people” (71).

But I live in a museum, so I'm okay.  
I'm the last of the good old fashioned steam-powered trains.

To look at one's life as a collection of past events and external influences would be, in fact, similar to be living in a museum, in constant contact with the past;<sup>35</sup> this is precisely what one would expect from a museum, a space where objects are duly preserved from eroding. In Davies' position, one only exists as long as objects which tell our history are kept preserved.<sup>36</sup>

“Bigmouth Strikes Again,” the single from The Smiths' *The Queen is Dead*, is a typical self-referential song in which Morrissey makes fun of himself and of his tendency to say the wrong things to the press. The comic tone of the song is emphasized by Morrissey's comparison to Joan of Arc, the fifteenth century French martyr; the comparison is comical in the sense it is disproportionate, for Morrissey is implying his big mouth puts him in the same position as that of someone who was burnt at the stake:

and now I know how Joan of Arc felt  
now I know how Joan of Arc felt  
as the flames rose to her roman nose  
and her Walkman started to melt<sup>37</sup>

The comical note is added by the reference to the Walkman, an evident anachronism with the fifteenth century. It is, nonetheless, a relevant anachronism for it is through it Morrissey establishes the analogy between himself and Joan: it is the relation to music which defines Morrissey; that is why the Walkman is melted by the fire, because it cannot be removed as any other accessory, it is a physical extension of this martyr. Simon Goddard links the song to a Patti Smith song, “Kimberly” (*Horses*, 1975), where Smith sings the line “And I feel like just some misplaced Joan of Arc”; having in mind Morrissey's appreciation for Patti Smith, the relation might not be entirely unfounded. In any case, it is a further note towards the notion this Joan of Arc is invested by a Walkman as a denotation of how she is constituted by music. In 2004, Morrissey recovered the song for a solo tour, introducing a change to accommodate technological improvements; Stephane Daigle notes, in his website *Passions Just Like Mine*, the word

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<sup>35</sup> Another proof of this concern in Davies' work is *Arthur or The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, the record that was released as a follow up to this in 1969.

<sup>36</sup> It is also interesting to note Davies, contrary to Neil Hannon, refuses to assume his responsibilities and its consequences, that is, a middle-class life; by living in a museum he delays the process of becoming “middle class and grey” as his friends.

<sup>37</sup> Stephane Daigle, in the website *Passions Just Like Mine*, transcribes the lyrics as they were originally printed in *The Queen Is Dead* album; I follow his transcription.

“Walkman” was changed to “iPod,” as it can be heard in the live album *Live at Earls Court* (2005). The change seems trivial, and one could remark that an earlier cover of the song by Placebo had changed the word “Walkman” to “Discman,” implying how such a change seems rather trivial; however, I think the question should be looked at in more detail, since it reveals a personality trait relevant for Morrissey’s characterization. My argument is that this change in the lyrics is only possible because the core meaning of the song is not changed by it; had the Walkman ceased to exist as a technical device (as indeed happened when technological advances rendered it obsolete), without being replaced by other devices (as indeed it was), the song would cease to be a possibility in Morrissey’s repertoire since it too had become obsolete. Daigle also notes the verb in the first line was changed from “Sweetness, sweetness I was only joking / when I said I’d like to smash every tooth / in your head,” to “Sweetness, sweetness I wasn’t joking...” This change can be dismissed as a joke in the sense that in 2004 there is no biographical records suggesting Morrissey could act upon such thought; whether he actually meant to smash someone’s teeth is not relevant: knowing his personality, the desire would never amount to more than a thought.

I believe this kind of position can be traced back to Morrissey’s unyielding relation to animal rights. In one of the many anecdotes of his autobiography, Morrissey tells how he broke off a work relationship with Arnold Stiefel, who was managing Morrissey’s career in the United States, because Stiefel ordered a bowl of frog legs during a lunch (279-80). More striking is his position about Roxy Music, even before he became famous with The Smiths: “But Roxy Music will drop quickly from the emotional radar soon, as singer Bryan Ferry announces that his favorite food is veal—second only to foie gras in savage cruelty” (84). Both these examples show a conviction towards the idea human intervention in nature is set on provoking destruction; that being so, humans have the responsibility to try and avoid behaviors which might cause such destruction. Human beings who do not observe such concern are considered part of the problem and, in Morrissey’s view, are thus lesser human beings. His position on animal rights is in close relation to the way songs’ meanings must be kept throughout time; it is not, as in Davies’ case, a question about preserving memories through objects but a question about preserving the objects themselves since those objects are an extension of human beings’ existence. If a song’s meaning does not resist the passing of time, it is its author’s personality at stake. In Davies, a human being is constituted by an array of objects his life

is related to over time; in Morrissey, a human being is defined by a set of beliefs he puts forward in his work, deeming the work worthless when it ceases to define its author.

To accompany the publication of *Will Oldham on Bonnie 'Prince' Billy*, Oldham recorded an EP to be part of a special hardback edition, and to be sold along with the first edition of the paperback. The EP, *Now Here's My Plan*, features versions of six previously recorded songs, among them "I See a Darkness."<sup>38</sup> What is striking about this version is the gloomy aspect of the first version is completely eradicated by an upbeat rendition in which most of what has been said about the meaning of the song is hardly traceable. The difficulty in tracing back the meaning of the song has to do with the light tone, musically and vocally, which is used in this later version, making it hard to understand how such lugubrious notions could have been conveyed. In that sense, this later version is incomprehensible, as if the meaning of the words had lost relevance. In fact, it seems to be the point of the song, to use the structure and modify it without much concern for its original meaning. Already in 2004, Oldham had released what must be the most appalling of his recordings, an album titled *Bonnie 'Prince' Billy Sings Greatest Palace Music*. As the title makes plain, the album features songs released under the several Palace denominations, which Oldham used in the beginning of his career, under new versions. What makes this an appalling album is the reworking of the songs, once bleak and minimalist, as country classics, recorded with professional session players and featuring everything one would expect to find in the most obvious country music performances. For Oldham's fans, as well as for the critics, it was a very surprising action and one which might have had pernicious consequences in the way some people relate to Oldham and to his work (it is Oldham's original work that is at stake).

Comparing Morrissey's position with Oldham's position, I believe the different approaches relate to their ideas about ecological concerns. In his conversations with Licht, Oldham says:

I always think that people look ridiculous when they dye their grey hairs away or get facelifts, and in the same way, when we try to "preserve" our planet, it sometimes has the same non-natural, uncomfortable... it's like denying that the planet has a life cycle. We exist within the planet and therefore are a part of its life cycle, and we most likely will be part of its destruction in one way or another. (Oldham 265)

The idea of preserving everything as it once was is naturally absurd to Oldham; so, when people look at the recreation of songs as a makeover, Oldham looks at it as a natural

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<sup>38</sup> The complete lineup is: "I Don't Belong To Anyone," "Beast For Thee," "No Gold Digger," "After I Made Love To You," "I See A Darkness" and "Three Questions."



evolution. To try to make a song resist time by continually reproducing its original structure is to deny it the possibility of evolution (to deny it its life cycle). Continuing his thoughts on how human beings relate to the natural world, Oldham adds:

I think I've always been a little mystified by the separation of man from nature, even the green movement and this idea that human beings have destroyed the world—that assumes that we are not *of* the world. That takes the position that because we “think,” we have the “responsibility.” To me it seems the ultimate hubris to say that humankind is destroying the world and could save the world, as opposed to saying that we are, in every action that we do, an aspect of the world. So it's not that it has the upper hand; it's that we are a tiny subset of the natural order. Some like to say that we are even a force to be reckoned with or recognised, but I don't believe we are. I don't believe that anything human beings do is any more or less significant than anything that a weed or a gust of wind does. I don't think humankind, throughout history, collectively has done anything that's any more valuable or important to the development or eventual destruction of what we recognise as the Earth than a sound vibration. (Oldham 266)

Oldham is not the only one to believe that human beings are like weeds (as it will be shown); but what is more striking in this position is the idea there is no chance of preservation, there is no society that can preserve anything. In strict opposition to Ray Davies' and Morrissey's positions, Oldham believes change is a natural aspect of being alive. Furthermore, if in every action we carry out we are part of the world, to refuse change would amount to refusing to be part of that world. Museums, for Oldham, have no special aura, they are just places that collect objects. In the already mentioned profile of Oldham for *The New Yorker*, Kelefa Sanneh says:

Long before 1997, when the Smithsonian reissued Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folke Music*, Oldham was fascinated by what Greil Marcus once called the “old, weird America.” But he also knows that, for many singers, a fixation on the antique and the quirky has been a handicap. “Old” is merely a word for something that was once new and survived; no amount of affectation will provide a shortcut. And “weird,” misapplied, can be even worse. (Sanneh)

Surviving does not mean things remain as they were and if they are to be used it makes no sense pretending they still have the qualities they had when they were made. To use songs from his early years as a musician in the same fashion as they were recorded is, counterintuitively, an insincere action; it implies he renounces who he is at a certain moment by ignoring his evolution, not only as musician but also as a human being. Where Oldham believes change is part of natural evolution, Morrissey believes change to be a corruption of personality. It seems to be this acceptance of a natural evolution that allows for Oldham's pseudonym to come along as a separate being the songs can be related to, since the songs are mere artefacts of one's passage through the world, never assertions or actions aimed at intervening in that world.

In Lionel Trilling's study on authenticity he cautions: "The belief that the organic is the chief criterion of what is authentic in art and life continues, it need hardly be said, to have a great force with us, the more we become alarmed by the deterioration of the organic environment" (127). Trilling is deferring the positions which hold that any "analogy to the machine, even a syllogism or a device of dramaturgy, is felt to be inimical to the authenticity of experience and being" (128); Trilling has in mind the notion that modernism sprang from "impatience with the idea of the organic" (128), making it impossible to attest for some artists' authenticity exactly because they dismiss that relation to the organic. What I have tried to put forward with these three positions on writing songs is that an artist's work is always in direct connection with how an artist relates to his environment; the belief some people hold about the possibility of a difference existing between what a writer says in a song and the writer's personality is thus incorrect. There is a necessary relationship between one's actions and one's own personality which cannot be broken, no matter if one writes about pastoral landscapes, about saint-like figures, or just continually redoes his former work. Authenticity is therefore dependent not on a relation to the organic as in the natural world, but on an organic relation between one's work and one's life. It is because this relation is organic that we are constantly worried about the environment's deterioration: the disappearance of our environment might mean our own disappearance.

## Why Do Birds Sing?

The question “Why do birds sing?” is recurrent when speaking of music, particularly when assessing the reasons why human beings sing. It is recognized that birds usually use sounds to attract the attention of other birds, whether to mate or to announce dangers, for instance. This, however, does not make birds a special kind of animal, since this type of communication is common in animals capable of producing sounds. What makes birds special is the resemblance the sounds they make have with what human beings call music; what is puzzling is the way birds’ sounds relate in such a musical manner. Rousseau inverted this position by stating melody must have come from the observance of birds singing, which might explain the resemblance between human music and birds’ music. Olivier Messiaen, the French composer and ornithologist, turned his notations of birdsongs into musical pieces which, once matured, gave way to complex constructions set to recreate not only specific birds’ songs but also to incorporate the landscape and certain times of the day. For Messiaen, part of the appeal of birds’ songs was the fact the sounds they produce resembled music without attachment to a specific set of rules human music traditionally complies to. Unpredictability was one of the attractions towards the birds’ songs but, in any case, Messiaen turned that unpredictability into a complex musical system set to bypass the old musical systems already under fire by many modernist approaches. Rousseau’s observation might have been distorted by centuries of music production, in which humans produced the several systems Messiaen was fighting against; this would turn the French composer into someone who went back to the original source. The problem is he ended up creating a system through which he could reproduce birds’ songs. One might come to the conclusion that systems are absolutely necessary to the production of music and, if so, that is something which sets birds and humans completely apart: while the first create music naturally (as part of their biologic constitution), the latter need theoretical systems to produce something similar.

A more complex issue concerns several species of birds that seem to sing for sheer pleasure. Messiaen did not appear to be concerned with this fact but many have been keen on establishing a relation between certain species of birds, which sing for no apparent practical reason, with some human beings’ predisposition towards singing. The question is not technical but deals with justifications: why do human beings sing without

apparent reason? Or, even more bluntly, why do human beings sing at all if they can communicate the will to mate and announce imminent danger by other means? The relation of bird singing to human singing lies in explaining why such an activity occurs when there is no practical survival issue attached to it. It is in this manner, for instance, that Friedrich Schiller mentions the lion's idle roaring and the bird's uninterested singing in *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*. Part of Schiller's project is to establish that human beings' relation with the aesthetic depends on acknowledging the idle aspect of art; his analogy of the lion's idle roaring and the bird's uninterested singing with some human activities tries to establish that it is in the nature of animals, whether human or not, to engage in idle activities: his idea of beauty requires such idle activities. According to Schiller's argument, idleness is a constitutive part of animals and so idle activities such as singing are described as organic human activities required for the correct biological functioning of our species. David Byrne, in his book *How Music Works*, came up with a similar position by noting several studies showing birds adapted their song to their environment. With a different emphasis, Byrne was arguing the evolution of music was deeply connected with constraints in the environment in the same way birds need to change their singing in order to be heard in different environments: birds in cities sing louder, birds inhabiting forests use a lower pitch (28-30). Implied in Byrne's analogy between the history of music and the genetic evolution of birds is the notion human song, while not natural, became part of humanity and was conditioned much in the same way as with birds adapting to new environments. Both Schiller and Byrne are trying to say singing is a natural activity in human beings, whether intrinsic to their nature or not.

In 1991, the American band Violent Femmes released their fifth album, precisely entitled *Why Do Birds Sing?*; formed in the early 1980s in Milwaukee, the band had become a cult band based on their first record, now considered a classic of pop music (*Violent Femmes*, 1983). The band issued a second record, *Hallowed Ground*, in 1984, and before splitting up released *The Blind Leading the Naked* (1986). They reunited in the late 1980s and released *3* in 1989. Violent Femmes' aptly named record *Why Do Birds Sing?* is an attempt at answering the question why human beings sing, particularly why they sing pop music; the question is naturally articulated in relation to the band's own history, their breakup and consequent reunion, reflecting a concern with the reasons why they keep doing what they do since, despite some critical respect and some following, there was a continual lack of commercial success. Gordon Gano, singer and songwriter of the band, writes songs offering answers which have to do with human survival although they might

seem petty and frivolous; Gano's reasons for singing make Schiller's notions of idleness an unnecessary excuse to explain why human beings sing (or indulge in art related activities of any kind). In a certain sense, Byrne's theory that music became a natural extension of certain human beings' identity is closer to the point were it not for the evolutionist theory associated with it. Many human beings do not have the kind of relation to music, or to any other art, as the one described in the next pages. The point I will try to make is that creating music (or art of any kind) can be seen as a way of intellectual preservation; in some sense, it is a move towards protecting what we believe makes us who we are. My argument is not that those people who do not create art are in any sense flawed but that they engage in other activities to which the same kind of consequences can be ascertained—among these activities we could list reading novels, going to museums, collecting stamps, or listening to music.

With such a purpose in mind, analyzing an album with a first song called "American Music" would make it easy to begin a dissertation on the relation people keep with their traditions and how music, as part of those traditions, is an inevitable part of our identity. Nonetheless, I want to start with a different kind of relation and look at two songs where the lyrics seem to be more relevant, to some extent, than the music. The songs are the two songs containing lyrics not originally written by Gano. The first is "Hey Nonny Nonny," which makes use of a 16th century poem by Shepard Tonie entitled "Colin":

Beauty sat bathing by a spring  
Where fairest shades did hide her;  
The winds blew calm, the birds did sing,  
The cool streams ran beside her.  
My wanton thoughts enticed mine eye  
To see what was forbidden;  
But better memory said, fie!  
So vain desire was chidden:—  
Hey nonny nonny O!  
Hey nonny nonny!

Into a slumber then I fell,  
When fond imagination  
Seemèd to see, but could not tell  
Her feature or her fashion.  
But ev'n as babes in dreams do smile,  
And sometimes fall a-weeping,  
So I awaked, as wise this while  
As when I fell a-sleeping:—  
Hey nonny nonny O!  
Hey nonny nonny!

While the relation one keeps with a particular poem might be enhanced or reduced by the particular musical setting, my argument here has to do with pleasure being one of the reasons why human beings sing. It is obvious people may sing for the pleasure of singing; but here the pleasure resides in turning a 16th century poem into a pop song without much change in the original meaning. However, that is just a way of speaking of pleasure and the changing of the title to “Hey Nonny Nonny” relates with a different kind of pleasure. The expression was commonly used in English medieval poetry, particularly in light-hearted and bawdy poetry; according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it usually meant “trifle and unimportant” although in rare uses it might refer to women’s genitalia. In Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, the expression occurs in Balthasar’s song “Sigh No More” (Act II, scene 3):

Then sigh not so, but let them go,  
And be you blithe and bonny,  
Converting all your sounds of woe  
Into hey nonny, nonny.

The song speaks of men’s inconstancy and their lack of commitment, implying marriage is an institution which means little to men. Most Shakespearean critics have noted the relevance of the song, although the discussion on what is implied by the insertion of the song into the play has diverged. Intrepid critics claim the song induces women to have a similar behavior as men’s and so to seek sexual satisfaction outside marriage (based on the rare meaning of the expression); more reasonable critics, however, note the claim made was to dismiss men’s infidelity as something natural and turn cries of sorrow for them into cheerfulness. Balthasar’s song implies women sigh through songs, as is proven by the false symmetry between the first lines in each stanza: “Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more, / Men were deceivers ever” (lines 1-2); “Sing no more ditties, sing no more / Of dumps so dull and heavy” (lines 9-10). Feelings are expressed through songs and so one could imagine it is possible to turn bad feelings into good feelings by changing the tune (and this is true about sorrow as it is about sexual frustration). This is precisely the use Violent Femmes give to the expression in the song; independently of the voyeuristic sexual connotations one might easily associate with the original poem, the claim made by the song is to dismiss worries into songs.

This reading opens the possibility for songs to have a therapeutic effect; and it is true there are examples of people who have associated idle singing to the ability of

changing feelings. The Kinks' "Mr. Songbird" (*The Village Green Preservation Society*) is such an example:

Won't you sing me a song or two,  
Won't take you long to just sing to me please,  
Won't you whistle a tune.  
I got nothing to gain, I got nothing to lose,  
But if you sing me a song,  
You'll make me happy.

In this song it is implied songs might have a therapeutic function but it is also implied that that therapeutic function is associated with a kind of carelessness which precludes songs from having meaning. Again, songs by birds are associated with idleness but in this sense the idleness is not related with intentions but meaning: because birds' songs cannot have meaning, they can have a therapeutic function. There are, then, two kinds of songs: bird-like songs and meaningful songs. The former have a therapeutic function; the latter deal with important issues and bring about "troubles," "problems," and "ghosts":

Sing Mr. Songbird,  
Sing Mr. Songbird,  
Sing Mr. Songbird,  
You help to keep my troubles away.  
You help to keep my problems away.  
You help to keep the devil away.

The request made in The Kinks' song is very close to the idea you can turn away from real problems with a "nonny nonny" song since meaningless songs naturally cause pleasure. It is also implied some people do not have the ability to produce songs that have no meaning since if that were a possibility one would not call upon Mr. Songbird (of all singers). What is under scrutiny is if it is possible to produce a meaningless song at all; it would seem that to scream "Hey Nonny Nonny" as the chorus of a song might be the closest one could get to such an endeavor (the expression's use is very often explained with the analogy to the "Yeah yeah yeahs" of pop songs).

The other song which has non-original lyrics in Violent Femmes' *Why do Birds Sing?* is a version of Culture Club's 1982 hit single "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me?"; the original song is barely recognizable in Violent Femmes' rendition of it and one must question why it is that someone would reproduce a song in such a different manner from the original. One attempt at answering the question is to say a particular song has some kind of interest to the new singer not reflected in the song's original version. This might mean a particular song has a meaning which goes beyond the relation between lyrics and

music; my claim is that while one might find meaning in the lyrics of a song, the particular form in which the song is made might have no relation to the listener (the opposite could also be true, one can relate to a melody without relating to the lyrics). What the Culture Club's song had was a set of lyrics of particular interest to Gano but to which he did not connect to if not by changing the music accompanying them; in this sense, the version of the song is set on reconstructing a meaning by introducing a new relation between lyrics and music. This might prove meaningless music is not the only way to get pleasure from songs; in this case, pleasure derives from what constitutes a human being: one cannot relate to something one does not understand, at least partially. The significance of this is to state our relation to the meaning of a song is not always based on immediate lyrical meaning but that we learn to relate to some kinds of music while automatically dismissing others. This is a common problem to people who say they do not understand the relevance of some musical styles; understanding music, in that sense, has to do with a particular form of learning which is not necessarily connected with formal education in music but with the way one learned to appreciate music by just listening to it and associating it with different things (we can associate music with the artists who create it and their lives but also with personal friends, events, or periods of one's life). The Violent Femmes' recovery of the song claims understanding songs depends not so much on the music but on a set of things associated with it.

In the liner notes of *Why do Birds Sing?* there is a picture of the band members vaguely reminiscent of the artwork of The Clash's first record (*The Clash*, 1977). To a certain extent, making music is just an extension of a wish to emulate the people who make the music one listens to. The point is made clear in the song "Look Like That," where making songs is also part of the aspiration to emulate one's heroes, not only their music but also their behavior and their way of dressing:

I like his shoes, I like his hat,  
I'd like me better if I looked like that.  
Uh -huh uh-huh  
I like her shoes, I like her hat,  
I'd like you better if you looked like that.  
Uh-huh uh-huh

But then my love starts burning  
For what we are yearning to ignore.

I like her clothes, I love her dress,  
I'd like her better if she loved me best.  
I like his shoes, I love his pants,  
I'd want him better if he wanted to dance.  
Uh-huh uh-huh



But then our love starts turning  
For what we are learning to adore.

I'm meeting people nice people too,  
I'm meeting people nice people like you.  
We're meeting people nice people too,  
We're meeting people nice people like you.

The two adversatives introduce couplets marked in the song by a musical change, in which the music's tempo is reduced, as if the aspirations to look like someone else were blocked by realizing there is a reality one has to live in. By the end it seems as if reality, without the right clothes or without people dressed in a certain way, is still a good place to be in, since one is still meeting nice people; my claim is that maybe sharing this kind of aspirations with other people is what enables the meeting of new people with similar tastes to ours—and people like that, one is tempted to say, might be as interesting as we intrinsically believe we are.

Going back to the first song, “American Music,” one should note it is not such an obvious account of tradition as one might believe. The song deals with human beings' relation to music and how that relation is always somewhat inadequate; the tradition, associated with the expression “American music,” is interchangeable with habits and does not refer to a particular history or special musical structures. This claim is based on the assumption the ironic tone perceivable in the song is counterbalanced by the sour tone of the refrain. Before explaining this point, let me mark the aspects conferring irony to the song. For one, the abusive employment of the word ‘baby’, as if mocking its use. Many singers, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, have publicly declared their contempt for the word; picked up from the first pop songs of the late 1950s and early 1960s, its excessive use in more commercial kinds of music has reduced it to a mere interjection. Its use by bands which do not usually feature the word in their songs is normally sarcastic. This is the case, with the word coming up seven times, in different moments and with different inflections; as a consequence, the addressee of the song becomes the other end of a joke, something which might be pertinent to access the tone of what is being said. This irony might be carried into the refrain, of which there are three different occurrences:

(1) You were born too late  
I was born too soon  
But every time I look at that ugly moon  
It reminds me of you  
It reminds me of you ooh ooh ooh

(2) You were born too soon  
I was born too late  
But every time I look at that ugly lake  
It reminds me of me  
It reminds me of me

(3) Baby you were born too late  
And I was born too late  
But every time I look at that ugly lake  
It reminds me of me  
It reminds me of me

The first two refrains are preceded by a similar section while the last is preceded by a section divided into an instrumental part and a part where multiple voices sing; thus, the song consists in three sections each ending with the refrain. The first noticeable change is in the opening lines, which imply either the addressee or the narrator change from section to section: in the first the narrator is too old; in the second too young. But by the third refrain, both narrator and addressee are too old. My claim is that this is a sour rendition of one's relation with music through life, where one is either too young to know certain things or too old to be part of new musical movements. The assessment here is that Gano is questioning the band's evolution and the lack of success it had throughout its career; once they were too young to be playing the type of songs they played, when they returned they were too old to appeal to younger audiences. The first two sections, just before the refrain, work, then, as pastiches of subjects featuring in many commercial songs, as if Gano were criticizing and mocking the subjects he would have to sing about in order to be successful; implied in the last section, nevertheless, is the idea those songs are also part of one's existence, since it is admitted all kinds of music are likeable:

Do you like American music?  
We like American music.  
I like American music, baby.  
Do you like American music?  
We like all kinds of music,  
But I like American music best.

We do not define ourselves by choosing a particular kind of music and stating "this is it"; one consumes many kinds of music in a process which has incongruences and evolutions, embarrassing moments along with proud moments. However, our preferences are more relevant in the assessment of who we are; this notion was already

implied in the second section of the song, where the narrator sings about never getting a date to the prom and subsequently implies that happened because “they” did not know American music was in his soul; put more simply, they could not know him if they do not know the music he hears:

I need a date to the prom,  
Would you like to come along?  
But nobody would go to the prom with me, baby.  
They didn't like American music,  
They never heard American music.  
They didn't know the music was in my soul, baby.

Part of the possibility of being a member of society encompasses the need to be understood, and that requires other people to share at least part of what makes us unique.

This kind of concern with the things making us unique is probably the reason Violent Femmes' songs are said to capture teenager's angst in such a perfect way, since it is in that period one most notably acquires musical tastes. Another such reference in the record is made in “More Money Tonight”; again, the first point is the notion of non-belonging associated with teenage years:

I always thought that I was different,  
I always felt that that was good.  
Sometimes in school people pick on me,  
In the gym locker room or in the hallway.  
Cruel things people do and say;  
Wait a minute wait a minute.  
I'll make more money tonight than you ever dreamed of.  
You thought I was strange, well just look at me now.  
If you are lucky, I'll play in your city  
And you can come see me if you got the...  
Somebody stole all my clothes that I like to wear  
But I'm so rich and famous baby what do I care?  
Wait a minute wait a minute.  
If you got the money.

Reasons for singing range across a broad scope, from people with aesthetic pretensions to people who just want to be famous by any means: they are all valid reasons; there is no causal relation between elaborate explanations for art and the actual production of art. In this particular case, spite is the reason implied by the singer. What makes this special is this singer understands that in the end music is how we relate and so, by keeping the present tense between the situations in school (supposedly past occurrences) and his present situation as a singer, he is also making an important statement: external

conditions do not erase inner states. The boy picked on by other kids in school is the same person who now rubs his fame on those same kids. Sometimes, that is all the reason one needs to sing, spite; that we can recognize spite in a song requires we also understand the music, just as Boy George's suffering needed a different music to be understood by a certain kind of people. It is spite that makes "More Money Tonight" interesting, as regret made "American Music" interesting, and as vanity made "Look Like That" interesting: these are things unavailable to birds. The nightingale might sing the most melodious tune but that does not make it inevitably beautiful; beauty is not evident in that way. For human beings, beauty comes attached to many different things.

## Sounds from Wonderland

*Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) was a TV show created by Amy Sherman-Palladino that ran for seven seasons on The WB (Warner Bros.) network. While the show never reached major audiences, or major peaks of popularity, it had a steady percentage of viewers throughout its run continually postponing its cancelation. The steady percentage of viewers was possible due to a faithful fan base which followed the show at a time when the offers on television were not as eclectic as they would become a few years after the show's premiere. Television production values suffered great changes since the 1990s right through to the twenty-first century, based mostly on cult shows such as *Northern Exposure*, *The X-Files* or *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, majorly supported by the quality of HBO's *The Sopranos*, a show which kept its quality as high as its audience's rating, television writing became a showcase for writers to explore a vast array of subjects freely. The status of television fiction writing increased as the most unobvious plots gained notoriety and popularity, even if that popularity did not always reach amazing ratings. When the *Gilmore Girls* first came about this transformation was underway and it was not yet clear television production could become what it did a decade later; the show's seven-year run was then possible not through the financial possibilities television now thrives on but mainly through a faithful number of viewers keeping the show profitable. I believe this kind of faithfulness comes from the way the show was built around the idea of a metaphorical community requiring the inclusion of viewers as members of said community. The communal bonding did not derive then from the plotline, centered on small-town life, but from the way the show's references to music, films and famous people of all sorts became an essential part of its identity. It is my claim the consequence of choosing those particular references congregates human beings who understand them as part of their own lives; the fictional world of the show then becomes a close replica not of reality but of people's wishes for certain kinds of human relationships.

The show dealt with the lives of single mother Lorelai Gilmore (Lauren Graham) and her teenage daughter, Rory (Alexis Bledel), in the fictional town of Stars Hollow, a place inhabited by a cast of quirky characters. Based on these two main characters, the show revolved around the difficult relationship Lorelai had to keep with her parents, Emily (Kelly Bishop) and Richard (Edward Herrman); estranged from her upper class family when she became pregnant during her teens, Lorelai built an independent life

within the community of Stars Hollow and the show's action began when she had to revive her relationship with her family due to the need for a loan to put her daughter through an expensive private school, Chilton. The private school and the Gilmore's family house, both in Hartford, were the two spaces where the action developed outside Stars Hollow and became the focus of the major problems in the plot (in later seasons Chilton was replaced by Yale as Rory moved from high school to college); within Stars Hollow, all problems seemed less difficult to deal with and had, usually, a comic undertone to them. When characters from the outside world entered Stars Hollow the event was usually treated as a happening, something close to falling down a rabbit's hole or going through a mirror; the analogy is not so far-fetched, for Stars Hollow represented, in fact, a kind of wonderland, with different habits and a special language.<sup>39</sup>

*Gilmore Girls* is mainly known for its high number of references to pop culture delivered in very fast-pace dialogue, evocative of the Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s. The relation to the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s might not be as nonsensical as it may seem at first sight, since the feeling of such movies, mainly of Frank Capra's idea of rural communities as paradigms of American values, lingers in this fictional space. The film critic David Thomson refers to Capra's films as "films [that] say they love the people, their natural decency, and the way it stands for American values" (121), and that is the kind of description one might apply to this town. The resemblances to Capra's ideal rural community are not accidental: upon a visit to Stars Hollow, Paris, a friend of Rory's from Chilton (thus an outsider), notes how even Frank Capra would revolt at such a cliché as the one depicted by Stars Hollow: "Nothing, not even a cigarette butt on the ground, I can't believe it. This town would make Frank Capra wanna throw up" ("Richard in Stars Hollow"). Some television critics have noted how the show might be looked at as a response to new family values emerging in late twentieth century western societies, particularly those concerning new family cores; those positions derive from those American values the show elicits as its background, not only through the upper class families which make up Lorelai's childhood but mainly through the small town life depicted by Stars Hollow. References to new parenting paradigms or new family models gain momentum as their contrast with old family models (Lorelai's family in Hartford) and old social paradigms (small town life) is inbuilt in the plot. Such description of the show is not very different from the description of most soap operas and should be underlined: the quality of *Gilmore Girls* does not derive from its innovative

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<sup>39</sup> Episode 19 from season 1, dealing with Emily's visit to Stars Hollow, is titled "Emily in Wonderland."

plot line or from the complex or original approach to such problems as the ones described.

What, then, makes *Gilmore Girls* special? I believe the answer for this question is that the show recreated a perfect community many would like to live in. In his presentation of remarriage comedies, Stanley Cavell notes that behind the new genre he is trying to define is the different role of women in early twentieth century American society; one might say that *Gilmore Girls* is related to new family values of the twenty-first century in the same way. In that sense, as noted before, the show is not more inventive than any other television show or most soap operas. The relation to the films Cavell analyzes is much more interesting if it is made through the description of the concept of “green world,” namely in its approximation to Shakespearean comedies and their magic worlds as described by Northrop Frye. Cavell describes how the characters move towards a “place within which the plot complicates and then resolves itself; a place beyond the normal world, where the normal laws of the world are interfered with; a place of perspective and education” (172); Stars Hollow is such a world. And if we look at what has been achieved by the main pair (here not a romantic pair), the town stands for the place where Lorelai was educated in the ways of adulthood and parenthood. The actual fleeing towards this place is kept, for the most part,<sup>40</sup> off screen, but it is always present in the way the story develops. Cavell adds that one of the features marking the genre is the fact the action normally moves from a glamorous place such as a big city, usually New York, to “a simpler place in the countryside, most often called, in these films, Connecticut” (Cavell, *Cavell on Film* 317). Stars Hollow, probably not by coincidence, is in Connecticut.

Frye, from whom Cavell takes the expression “green world,” emphasizes how in Shakespearean comedies the contradiction between two different worlds is essential to understand the magical nature of the world in which the action is resolved: “the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world” (182). The green world is in sharp contradiction to the normal world in the sense the green world is ingrained with an order, whether social or natural, lacking in the normal world (it is the lack of order in the normal world which originates the complications of the plot). The contradiction between worlds is stretched even further when Frye describes the plays falling into his description in the following

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<sup>40</sup> Some flashbacks of Lorelai’s story are shown in the episode “Dear Emily and Richard” (episode 13 from season 3).

terms: “We may call it the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land” (182). The triumph of life and love over a “waste land” is the victory of the green world over the normal world; normal world and “waste land” are, in this sense, different ways of naming the same space. The quirkiness of Stars Hollow’s characters might be seen, then, in opposition to the normality outside the town, in the “waste land.” From these descriptions one might understand how a community as Stars Hollow might be a comfortable place to inhabit, even if only in fictional terms; it is a place one might even pine for:

The green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires. This dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience, of Theseus’ Athens with its idiotic marriage law, of Duke Frederick and his melancholy tyranny, of Leontes and his mad jealousy, of the Court Party with their plots and intrigues, and yet proves strong enough to impose the form of desire on it. Thus Shakespearean comedy illustrates, as clearly as any mythos we have, the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from “reality,” but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate. (Frye 183-4)

According to this description, the normal world has a correlation to the world of experience, to reality, while the green world represents our desires, human desires, for the introduction of order in that world of experience; Shakespearean comedies, in this sense, fulfill the archetypal function of literature by recreating in their green worlds the kind of world human beings try to imitate in their lives. My suggestion is the archetypal function of literature is kept intact in the fiction of *Gilmore Girls*, as it is kept through the fictions of films, paintings, songs or, if one recovers Cavell’s main focus point, any kind of conversation.

Cavell’s work in *Pursuits of Happiness* is an attempt to illustrate the importance of conversations, and in the films he chooses he always stresses the significance of conversation for the final goal of each plot, the remarriage of the main characters; Cavell states that what happens in those films is “the central pair are learning to speak the same language” (88). In the *Gilmore Girls* there is no romantic pair but a mother and a daughter that often talk too fast for other characters to understand, especially characters from outside Stars Hollow. Conversation is then an essential part, just as in Cavell’s films, of what happens in the show; but here the education in conversation is not between the members of the central pair but between the pair and the rest of the world. Most characters from Stars Hollow do not understand the conversations of the central pair, namely because they do not share their references; but since they belong to the same community and thus know each other well, they can almost always infer the subjects



under discussion. Characters who do not belong to this community have a much harder time understanding what they say. The two foreign characters that can easily relate to the main pair are Christopher (David Sutcliffe), Rory's father, and Jesse (Milo Ventimiglia), one of Rory's boyfriends; both these characters share one feature other characters, including Stars Hollow's characters, do not have: they share the same references as the main pair. The main question Cavell's films raise is "What does a happy marriage *sound* like?" (86); in *Gilmore Girls* the question is: What does a happy community sound like? Constantly dwelling within the geographic space of a community is not the only way of belonging to it; belonging to this particular community requires not only that one understand how it works and come to know the people who constitute it, but also that one understand the conversations taking place in it. The fast-pace dialogue of the show, already hard to follow, is complicated by its constant use of references to such different things as television shows, films, or music, requiring one to understand at least some of those references. Part of the appeal the show holds is then kept by the fact some viewers understand the conversation being held while some of the characters fail to grasp it. The references to popular culture are a link between these characters and the viewers, and so the conversations taking place in the show include the viewers who know those references while excluding some characters, especially characters who do not inhabit Stars Hollow. I would propose learning the language being used in some conversations is easier when the language has been learned in the same dictionary—a list of references might be such a dictionary. The use of such references in the world of experience, to which anyone can have access, allows for people to easily relate to this specific fictional green world; and since the references are not exclusive to the fictional world the community can easily be enlarged by those who do not live in it.

The sound of a community is not only a result of its conversations and in *Gilmore Girls* the sound of the community is also the music one listens to (whether diegetic music or not). The *Gilmore Girls* pilot episode begins with the camera following Lorelai through Stars Hollow's town square to the sound of The La's "There She Goes Again." The presentation is perfect in the way it combines the camera work, introducing the set the show will take place in, while implying the repetitious nature of Lorelai's action through the song, particularly because of the nature of the refrain and the way the word "again" is underlined by the second voice. The most perceptive aspect of this presentation, nevertheless, lies in the musical reference—The La's were not, at the time, the most obvious choice for a show needing audiences in order to exist. The same might be said

of the song the pilot ends with, “My Little Corner of the World”; again, as in the previous case, the song is playing a relevant part in the show in more than one way, the most noticeable being how the lyrics induce the impression one has been introduced into a special place. Nonetheless, the song has other ways of conveying meaning and assumes an important role within the show. Its relevance is attested by the fact it occurs again in the last episode of the first season and by the fact the Original Sound Track of the show was named after a verse in the song, *Our Little Corner of the World* (2002). A final indication about the importance of the song for the show is the fact that when the rights to use Yo La Tengo’s version in the pilot were denied, Sherman-Palladino asked a friend, Kit Pongetti, to do a cover not of the original song but of Yo La Tengo’s version.

“My Little Corner of the World” was written by Lee Pockriss and Bob Hilliard, and recorded in 1960 by Anita Bryant. The song was a typical love ballad about finding someone to love and other artists recorded it after in a similar style to its original version. Yo La Tengo recorded the song for their 1997 album *I Can Hear the Heart Beating as One*. Likely the best album by Yo La Tengo, many critics considered it the peak of their development as musicians, particularly keeping in mind the band’s lineup in the recording of the album had only been together for five years. The band was formed in 1984 and during the 1980s it struggled to keep a permanent lineup, having difficulties assuring a steady bass player; Ira Kaplan and his wife Georgia Hubley formed the core of the band until 1992, when bassist James McNew joined in permanently. Although “My Little Corner of the World” is a cover, the song has gained a significant meaning in the band’s career and many believe the song actually refers to Ira and Georgia’s search for the third member of the band’s final lineup. This assumption is based on the change introduced in the last stanza where the subject becomes plural:

And if you care to stay in our little corner of the world,  
We could hide away in our little corner of the world.  
We always knew that we’d find someone like you,  
So welcome to our little corner of the world.

This last stanza follows an instrumental section and it is plausible the instrumental section is the result of two people finding one another: the result of the relationship between the singer, Georgia, and her husband, Ira. The change in the last stanza would then be the acknowledgment of the couple finally having found the last member of the band, James; retrospectively, nonetheless, the instrumental section stands as the accomplished work of the three band members and the music the result of their union,

allowing for the last stanza and its change from the original song. This reading is reinforced by the album's title, *I Can Hear the Heart Beating as One*, which implies communion. In that sense, the expression "our little corner of the world" would be referring to music production, to a metaphorical corner of the world represented by the music they produce (I have read somewhere, or heard from someone, that the corner of the world might be literally referring to Georgia's place behind the drum kit—the song would then be a tale of how Georgia first found her husband and then how both found James; it might be interesting to follow this hint but the suggestion leads to the same place, a corner of the world where music is made or played). To believe this is a song about three people is to acknowledge a special bond uniting them: the band is also a family (and families are a sort of community).

The use of the song in *Gilmore Girls* is not concerned with the actual meaning of the song for the band members, although it is relevant that when the rights to play Yo La Tengo's version could not be acquired, a specific request for their version was made. The song is not used because its particular meaning about the band is being summoned but because the change in the last stanza holds some value to the story of the show. The point is to convey that a space has been set up where people can come together since communities need a place, whether literal or metaphorical, people can congregate around; Stars Hollow is such a place in a literal sense (although fictional) and in a metaphorical sense (through the references used, particularly the musical references).<sup>41</sup> The Original Sound Track album for the show, *Our Little Corner of the World*, thus becomes the physical object the metaphorical place is consubstantiated in. The particular stress being put on the meaning of the song must not, in any case, defer the other ways a song might be meaningful. The use people attribute to songs is not merely determined by the meaning of the lyrics nor even by the moods conveyed by their melodies. This is a very relevant point: prior to any meaning the songs might hold, the choice of bands like The La's and Yo La Tengo already has a meaning and Sherman-Palladino takes advantage of that throughout the show's duration. Naturally, this goes beyond the actual use of music and is part of the relevance these references hold in a conversation; beyond conversation topics, the references are ingrained within the characters' lives. For instance, in Lorelai's childhood room, between floral motifs and wooden dollhouses, a poster of Echo and the Bunnymen's *Ocean Rain* (1984) is enough to characterize Lorelai's teenage years. One does not need to hear the neo-romantic lyrics or the gloomy melodies

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<sup>41</sup> A drum kit could also be a place around which people congregate.

of the album to understand the band's name holds a meaning and confers personality to the character it is associated with. The opening of the pilot episode, to the sound of The La's, is even more perfect if one understands the people the show is directed at are already defined in that presentation.<sup>42</sup>

One can always dismiss such communities as mere fictional places which have no correlation with reality; the use of the word “magical” to define what has been called green worlds is naturally a constraint for people who believe hard reality is a more relevant matter for reflection. In 2006 Warner Bros., responsible for the The WB, announced a merger with CBS, and the result was the replacement of The WB by the new channel The CW. Along with the network's business, came a negotiation for a seventh season of *Gilmore Girls*; Sherman-Palladino made some demands which were not met by the new network, and she eventually announced her parting from the team that produced and wrote the show. There would eventually be a seventh season without Sherman-Palladino and the show would be cancelled after that. The last episode of the sixth season was then appropriately named “Partings,” referring to the creator's leaving the show while also alluding to the episode's own storyline in which Rory's boyfriend Logan (Matt Czuchry) leaves for a job in London and Lorelai breaks off her engagement. Throughout the seasons, *Gilmore Girls* had featured Grant Lee Philips, the singer and songwriter mostly known as the lead singer of the band Grant Lee Buffalo, as the town's troubadour. In this last episode of the sixth season, the rumor comes to Stars Hollow that the town's troubadour has gotten himself a deal which features an opening slot in a Neil Young's tour; as the rumor spreads and reaches the “East Coast Troubadour Community,” Stars Hollow is swarmed by troubadours trying to get discovered just as the official town's troubadour had been. During the episode, Taylor Doose (Michael Winters), a kind of town's mayor, tries to stop new troubadours from playing in Stars Hollow; his failed efforts culminate in a crane shot of the town square, filled with troubadours, with overlapping songs being heard. That crane shot becomes the consummation of the metaphor built by the musical references used in the show—this community is built upon these particular musical references, by the men and women playing in this town square. The metaphor might be pressed even further if one adds that just as the town's troubadour is someone well-known in the (real) musical community, the troubadours plaguing the town in this episode are played by well-known musicians,

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<sup>42</sup> Naturally, the use of the song might have been coincidental but in that case faithful audiences would not follow.

most of them contributors to the show's soundtrack; once these people were only present through their music, now they are physically there.

Among these troubadours are the members, for instance, of Yo La Tengo, playing "Tried So Hard," a cover of a Gene Clark song recorded for their album *Fakebook* (1990); other interesting cameos are the members of The Sparks or Sam Philips, the musician responsible for the show's original score. The cameo that interests me, nonetheless, is a family cameo: Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon, the couple the band Sonic Youth was built around, and their daughter, Coco. Their cameo is peculiar in the sense their performance as troubadours, with Thurston and Kim playing electric guitars while their daughter plays the bass by their side, defies the normal idea of the troubadour as the lonely man playing acoustic guitar; along with the question of electricity, they will also pretend to be in a normal Sonic Youth concert and start jumping around, leading to Doose's request they "cease all music and all jumping." In the credits for the episode, this family ensemble is known as Cool Dad Troubadour, Cool Mom Troubadour, and Cool Kid Troubadour. What interests me here is the fact fiction and reality overlap, for while having fictional names, they stand in Stars Hollow not precisely as fictional characters but as the real family they are. This is relevant because so far Stars Hollow represented a fictional space many could relate to through a series of references; however, what is true of fictional Stars Hollow is true of reality also, even when there is no physical place (an idea of family bonding might fill in for such a space since, as noted about Yo La Tengo, a family is a sort of community).

In a profile piece about Kim Gordon, written for *The New Yorker*, Alex Halberstadt tells us that in Northampton, Massachusetts, live people like J. Mascis, the man behind the band Dinosaur Jr., Charles Thompson IV, better known as Black Francis, the lead singer and main songwriter of the Pixies, or Julie Cafritz, formerly from Pussy Galore or STP. He also speaks of how "Gordon and Moore collaborated with local musicians, played fund-raisers for a nearby school, and took Coco to piano and drama lessons in a Volvo wagon" (23). The notion of a community where citizens are all somehow related to the world of music is even stronger if one accepts they are as real as everyone else, performing such tasks as picking up their kids from after-school activities; the magical part of such a community is the notion a normal life does not exclude more glamorous affairs, as described by Nitsuh Abebe:

In Gordon and Moore, you could imagine empirical proof that a lot of things you feared were true about life—things your parents always warned you about—did not necessarily have to be that way. For

instance: that a career in an avant-garde rock band might lead not into penury, instability, and isolation but instead to a place in a perma-cool family living in a nice house in the Berkshires. That committing to being a feminist, punk, or artist would not cut you off from normal people and force you into huge compromises in your domestic affairs but might actually lead you to someone who'd share all of those commitments. That a heterosexual married couple could not only work together but collaborate as equals and throw equally large shadows. What better fairy tale to reassure young people that they don't ever have to settle? It's like getting a notarized letter containing three important promises: that your bohemian dreams won't conflict with middle-class contentment; that maybe the reason your parents' generation all divorced was that they never found partners cool enough to be in a band with; and that you, as an adult, could do better. (Abebe)

Abebe wrote this paragraph in reference to the news of Gordon and Moore's divorce, announced on October 15, 2011, through a statement released by the record label Matador; two days later, on October 17, John Dolan, a *Rolling Stone* critic not known for being emotional, had already famously started a chronicle on Grantland with the following lament: "Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" The couple was divorcing after 27 years of marriage and the divorce casted immediate doubts about the future of Sonic Youth, the band they started and nurtured since 1981.

In that last episode of *Gilmore Girls* overseen by Sherman-Palladino, we see the town troubadour return from his adventure empty handed; the slot in the Neil Young tour resulted in him being booed, harassed by the crew members and not getting paid. In her interview with Halberstadt, Gordon tells the story of how, at the peak of Sonic Youth's commercial success, the band also toured with Neil Young; Young's crew was not respectful towards the band, constantly turning their sound down while it kept inviting strippers backstage. Gordon sighs: "We thought our heroes were enlightened, but then you see that" (Halberstadt 27). It is not clear whether Gordon had made this publicly known before but it seems too much of a coincidence that Sherman-Palladino would come up with such a similar situation to use in the show; in any case, the point I would like to make clear is that one is only protected within the realm of a community. In some cases, the projection of a green world is an attempt to struggle with the notion one's life lacks order; in other cases, it is a protection measure against the idea people one admires might not be so respectable as one might have thought from their artistic production. One is constantly building green worlds which can serve as a counterpoint to the "waste land" of normality. Allegiance to some kinds of art, or some kinds of activities, is an attempt to reach that magical world of order. The real divorce of this real couple is an intrusion of the normal world into a green world; it matters little these things happen in fiction or in reality.

In Halberstadt's profile of Kim Gordon, we are told "TV night had been an institution for Gordon, Moore, and Coco, and outsiders were expected to maintain a

respectful silence” (24). The family would sit through entire seasons of shows in a room “dominated by a ‘Gilmore Girls’ poster, signed by the cast” (24). Among the box sets with television shows, Halberstadt sees *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*. Gordon would remark they never finished watching the show: “Maybe that’s why our relationship ended,” she adds. Probably meant as a funny remark, the bitterness is reminiscent of the way some things have meaning to one’s life. It is close to the bitterness in assessing her relation to Sonic Youth: “But Sonic Youth, for better or worse, is/was a machine that carried me along through pregnancy, motherhood, and creative opportunities I never would have achieved on my own. [...] I’m grateful and surprised that we were listened to, loved, ignored, and overrated” (27). There is no difference between fiction and reality in the sense some objects carry us through life; Gordon speaks of Sonic Youth as the machine which carried her through her life, a machine she was a part of. But one does not need to be a part of Sonic Youth to be able to describe the band as the sound that one listened through one’s life. Perhaps watching *Buffy* all the way through would have kept the couple together, in the sense it would allow for their conversation to continue (a marriage, Cavell reminds us, is the result of a conversation between two people); if this is so, then the line separating fiction from reality is irrelevant—it is all part of the conversation we would like to keep going for as long as possible. Kim Gordon’s divorce, in that sense, is similar to interrupting the watching of *Buffy*—a threat hanging over everyone’s life announcing green worlds are hard to come by and must be preserved at all costs, at the risk some conversations might come to an end.

## The Gardener

John M. Ellis, in a chapter titled “The Definition of Literature,” from *The Theory of Literary Criticism*, compares literature to ‘weeds’. Ellis explains how the usual attempts at a definition of literature fail because the question “What is literature?” is poorly formulated, making any attempt to account for all cases we consider under the designation ‘literature’ ineffective. Taking the comparison to weeds as sound, since it is a concept that can be understood “as organizing rather than describing our world” (41), Ellis goes on to outline how difficult it is to give a definition of all we account for as belonging to the category of weeds without a notion of performance; weeds are not defined by a list of features but by what we do with certain plants: weeds are those plants we have no use for. The choice of weeds as an example parallel to literature arises from the conviction that from that case “it is not difficult to see that there is a certain sense in which weeds do not exist until we make them into weeds” (41); the same plant might be treated as a weed according to the use given to it and, in the same vein, literary texts require something to be done in the ways of literature in order to become literature. Without going very far in analyzing what it is to treat a text as literature, the texts which are part of what we call literature are built, according to Ellis, by communities treating them as such. Ellis is positioning himself in a debate at its peak in academic circles in the 1970s concerning the stability of meaning, assuming the side which presumes texts not to have a fixed meaning. As Stanley Fish proposes in *Is there a Text in This Class?*, Ellis is on the side of those known as the New Readers (which includes Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom, and Fish) against the side of Meyer Abrams (who coined the term New Readers) or E. D. Hirsch (305). The discussion revolves around the stability, or lack of stability, in the meaning of texts; Fish, being who he is, goes even further in assuming not even the idea of a text is rigid enough, a text itself being a construction of readers. In Fish’s theory, one should not be worried about this type of fickleness of texts and texts’ meanings, since we are already part of what he designates as “interpretive communities,” spaces where those questions are resolved through continual conversations.

Fish’s appeal to interpretative communities implies we learn as we grow up and that specific matters which do not affect a bigger community (a community in a geographical sense, for instance) are dealt with by smaller communities (academic, for instance); this would suggest no matter how a community is organized, the ascribing of



meaning is a natural process in the dealings of each community and problems concerning meaning find their resolution within each community's practices. Ellis, about this matter, says:

Contrary to the view that value must not be brought into a definition (which, it is often said, should be a matter of observable characteristics), the definition of literature must, like the definition of weed, bring into a definition in a very central way the notion of value: the category is that of the texts that are considered worth treating in the way that literary texts are treated, just as weeds are the members of a category of things that are thought worthy of the treatment accorded to weeds. In both cases the definition states an element of the system of values of the community. The membership of the category is based on the agreement to use the texts in the way required and not on the intent of the writer that the text shall be used. (Ellis 50-1)

The problem's resolution is not that easy, as Ellis points out in reference to his example of weeds, denoting it is hard to grasp a concept in which intentions, author's intentions, for instance, are not relevant for the outcome; weeds have the peculiarity of being "[...] plants that we do not wish to cultivate. The reason for the child's inability to use the concept is that he does not yet understand the social convention as to which plants are not wanted" (38). And so, as MacIntyre assumes regarding our dependency as rational animals, we must trust our imperfect teachers until we can ourselves assume the position of imperfect teachers to our children. But how do we deal with these problems when we are no longer children? Do communities continually serve as decision supporters? That which is more distressing in the idea of being in accordance with a community, as in Fish's use of interpretive communities as decision makers, is not just the difficulty one might have in defining community and, as such, the problem with holding different assumptions from a certain community, but mainly the indulgence he treats the ascribing of meaning with. I believe a decision concerning the attribution of meaning carries a moral attachment which Fish's theory does not underline and which makes that decision process seem futile, even if it is just part of our daily routines, as indeed it is most of the time. My argument for the next pages is to highlight the fact the choice between meanings for a certain object might indeed be communally related but is, necessarily, individually related too and, that being so, the moment of choice is absolutely essential to who we are as human beings.

I believe enough has been said in previous pages to refute Fish's assumption that communal treatment of texts is sufficient to ascertain meaning; personal contexts are an intrinsic part of human beings and, consequently, meanings are dealt with and determined within biographical contexts, as variable as the concept of biography might be; on top of that, as it was also implied, interpretive communities are very fickle to just

take them for granted as problem solvers about the meaning of texts, or any other objects. What I want to do for the next pages is to look at a songwriter's work and see how he deals with questions of the loneliness we necessarily find ourselves inside of when decisions have to be made about the meaning of things in and for our lives, no matter how the contexts and the communities might help shape those meanings. What I want to propose is that ascertaining a meaning is a lonely choice and one we have to assume moral responsibility for. My proposition will be based on Bill Callahan's album *Apocalypse* (2011), particularly on the song "Baby's Breath," a song that by what is probably a very lucky coincidence uses the same example as Ellis' to expound the difficulty in ascribing meanings to things.

As in other singers' examples, the album under scrutiny exemplifies a moment of maturity after a great career change and, as in many of these moments, the change reveals a special concern about what is at stake in the writing process, and so I want to show how that concern is the organizing theme of the songs which compose the album. Unlike Will Oldham, a friend of his, Bill Callahan's career moved from a band's designation to his Christian name; in the beginning of his recording career, back in the late 1980s, Callahan was protected by the designation Smog, a designation he kept until 2007, when he released the album *Woke on a Whaleheart* using his own name. While the resolution in these singers' careers has been different, the path was very similar since Callahan, as Oldham, seems to have crossed a period of doubt, which manifested itself by the fact two of the last three Smog albums had the authorship attributed to (Smog); the parenthetical confining of Smog was an attempt to deal with a designation Callahan would later say "didn't seem healthy" (Thompson). The albums which had the authorship attributed to (Smog) were *Rains on Lens* (2001) and *Supper* (2003); the last album attributed to Smog was *A River Ain't Too Much to Love* (2005), an album Callahan comments on as such:

I wanted to release it under my own name, but my record label begged me not to. They said every band on their label that has changed their name has a drop in record sales that takes two to three years of plugging away to get back to what you had before. I was confident that what happened to those other people wouldn't happen to me. I also thought it might help—maybe some people who hated Smog but didn't know the singer's name would buy my album. But the name change was an afterthought with *A River...* So, I conceded to the label on that one. In a way, I am glad my debut album is not all stripped down like *A River...* is. But it really could go either way. *A River...* is a transitional record, so it could be one or the other, Bill Callahan or Smog. (Howe)

Economical issues might be part of the explanation but the unhealthy aspect of the Smog designation was also a symptom, as it was with Oldham, of a difficulty in accepting

his position as a singer and songwriter. In 2011, speaking of *Apocalypse*, Callahan would characterize the change as a result of self-knowledge: “A couple of years ago I realised that I was an entertainer and that helped me immensely. From the first time you can look in the paper and you accept that you’re the entertainment for some people that night it becomes so much more enjoyable to play live. Before that I was always wondering, ‘What am I?’” (Thompson). The position of entertainer becomes an outlet for the difficulty in dealing with the idea of being an artist, an idea which carried along the notion of self-sacrifice: “I equate being an artist with impaling yourself on your art. Only feeding, feeding the thing always. And it being starving” (Howe). This notion is stressed again, in the same interview, by the restatement that Callahan no longer sees himself as an artist: “I used to be an artist. I don’t think I am right now. I don’t know if I ever will be again. I am something else. I was a student of personal strife. I ran with the wrong crowd early on. I tortured myself for a song. I thought it was the way.” While Oldham found an answer for his anxiety as a songwriter in a pseudonym, Callahan just dropped any designation and assumed himself as the author, the difference between the two probably resting on the fact Oldham required a different identity to absorb the material of the songs and Callahan just recognized that, being an entertainer, a distance between his life and his performances was implied.

A demonstration of how hard it is to shake off the relation between lyrics and personal life is better expounded by noting how fans and journalists have debated how the song “Baby’s Breath” might have as a subject an abortion; the discussion on the abortion is specified by naming one of Callahan’s former girlfriends, singer and songwriter Joanna Newsom. The speculations, and that is the case, become more interesting when they imply the abortion is not only the subject of this song but also of the song “Baby Birch,” from Newsom’s album *Have One On Me* (2010). What is interesting in introducing this relation between the songs is that it acknowledges it is through the songs these singers speak to each other, just as Oldham addressed friends through songs, or Ray Davies spoke to Julie Finkle (whether people are real or fictitious is irrelevant to the point). Apart from the conversation about the personal facts of the singers’ lives, which cannot be verified and reduces the significance of the songs (at least in Callahan’s case), it is interesting to establish a connection between songs. I have a similar intuition about a relation between two songs referring to specific biographical moments; the songs are Callahan’s “Diamond Dancer” (*Woke on a Whaleheart*) and “Cross Bones Style,” a song from another singer and songwriter ex-girlfriend, Chan Marshall

(known musically as Cat Power), from her album *Moon Pix* (1998). This particular Cat Power album, written when she was living with Callahan, was key in her career as it was its success which made her reconsider the decision of abandoning music altogether, something she admitted to being under consideration. My intuition is based on the notion this Cat Power's song is about Callahan and so the "crystal clear eyes" and the "diamond eyes" referred to are Callahan's; my proposal is that what Callahan's song is describing in the line "She danced herself so hard she danced herself into a diamond" is Marshall's dancing in the video of her song, an extroverted activity she was not particularly given to. What reinforces my intuition is the belief the relation is not only established by the reference to diamonds in both songs but mainly by the danceable beat of each one, since danceable is a very unexpected description for songs in both singers' careers.

As with other singers, Callahan's evolution from the Smog designation to his own name was an attempt to tackle what he thought was a pernicious way of dealing with his musical work, an attempt to find a comfortable place to write from; one notorious thing about finding a comfortable place to write from is a detachment towards more biographical material, as if the proximity between songs and real life did not matter anymore. It is also a feature of these kinds of shifts that the focus immediately centers on the act of writing and how a relation is established with that process, what one would call self-reflexivity. Something clearly explicit in the shift in Callahan's writing was a move towards a bigger cohesion within the albums, not only musically but particularly thematically, as if an album were not just a compilation of songs but were itself a narrative built by the songs; in that sense, *Apocalypse* is, in fact, a moment of technical maturity, the moment where Callahan seems to understand how his rebirth will work better. Describing the album as a narrative construction, Callahan explains: "Maybe because it starts with a cattle drive. Then the second song, 'Baby's Breath', is about what happens when you finally choose where you're going to settle down and get your own plot of land. After that comes 'America,' which is looking at the bigger picture of stuff that's gone before in terms of the whole country" (Thompson). The cohesion of the structure is shown by the resurfacing of key words, or notions, which come up in some songs and are reworked in others; Callahan's *Dream River* (2013) is an expansion of this kind of construction.

On the basis of those more cohesive constructions, the idea "Baby's Breath" might address an abortion is expanded by the use, in "One Fine Morning," a later song,

of the expression “the baby and we.” However that is not what makes the song relevant for my argument, but rather the fact that Ellis’ notion about the definition of weeds finds an articulation here. This is a transcription of the lyrics as they are reproduced in the album’s booklet:

There grows a weed looks like a flower  
Looks like baby’s breath on a mirror

My girl and I rushed atop the altar  
The sacrifice was made  
It was not easy undertaking  
The root’s grip sucked like a living grave

Oh young girl at the wedding  
Baby’s breath in her hair  
A crowning lace above her face  
That’ll last a day before it turns to hay

Good plans are made by hand  
I’d cut a clearing in the land  
For a little bed  
For her to cry comfortable in

Each day I looked out on the land  
And I wondered what all was gone  
Until I saw it was lucky old me  
How could I run without losing anything?  
How could I run without becoming lean?  
It was agreed  
It was agreed  
It was me tearing out the baby’s breath

Oh I am a helpless man  
So help me!  
I’m on my knees  
Gardening  
Trying to make the baby’s breath blow

It was not a weed it was a flower  
My baby’s gone  
Oh where has my baby gone?  
She was not a weed she was a flower

And now I know you must reap what you sow  
Or sing.

The discussion about this song referring an abortion, beyond the relation with actual facts, is plausible on account of the shifting of meaning in the expression “baby’s breath;” what I want to explain with this song is that the shift in the meaning of baby’s breath, from the literal air expelled from a baby’s mouth to the weed of the same name and to the weed as an ornamental part of the “crowning lace” (and thus, under Ellis’ description, no more a weed but a flower), is not just a technical ability on Callahan’s part

but a reflection about morality: deciding on the meaning of things is generally, although a socially constrained action, a solitary action which has consequences not only in our own lives but also in the lives of others. This is not to reduce Callahan's technical abilities as a songwriter, particularly as the shifts in meaning peak when he sings the lines "My baby's gone / Oh where has my baby gone?", where the ambiguity of "baby" is latent as one wonders if it refers to an actual baby or to the bearer of that baby;<sup>43</sup> the argument relates to a concern about looking back on one's life and to what such a life amounts to retrospectively. This concern stretches across this album, and it is not to a great surprise one finds a song as "America!" immediately following, since as one ponders on personal actions, one cannot but wonder what is our legacy towards the tradition in which one works (a collegial concern, one might say). Although "America!" holds a very humoristic tone, with a list of singers identified along with their army patents (the ones they actually had during their military service), that humor must not devalue the fact the song is still a consideration about one's place within a certain tradition:

Captain Kristofferson!  
Buck Sergeant Newbury!  
Leatherneck Jones!  
Sergeant Cash!  
What an Army!  
What an Air Force!  
What a Marines!  
America!  
I never served my country  
America!

Afghanistan!  
Vietnam!  
Iran!  
Native American!  
America!  
Well everyone's allowed a past they don't care to mention  
America!

Belonging to a tradition is, naturally, a way of fitting into a community; nevertheless, fitting into a community does not necessarily involve accepting every practice of that community, as the second quoted stanza demonstrates by implying serving one's country might involve less noble contributions. The point of relevance, as with the more personal concerns in "Baby's Breath," has to do with things always having a double nature to them (being proud of America must not dissuade us from imagining it as having shameful events in its past).

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<sup>43</sup> One should note the relevance given to the word 'baby', an obvious play on its usual meaningless use in pop songs.

Returning to “Baby’s Breath,” the song narrates the beginning and ending of a relationship from the man’s point of view and most of what goes into it is the idea things are continually evolving or taking new shapes when looked at from different perspectives. An example of the problems with perspective is the description, in the fifth stanza, of how things seem to be gone until Callahan “sees” that actually it is “lucky” him who has left. The most compelling change is actually accomplished by the comparison between the last line of the fifth stanza: “It was me tearing out the baby’s breath,” with the last line of the sixth stanza: “Trying to make the baby’s breath blow.” Before delivering this last line, Callahan sings he is on his knees, gardening; but this position is also a position one would have to be in order to resuscitate a baby, blowing air into his mouth. The ambiguity pursued by the flower/weed dichotomy is now enhanced by the analogy between plants and human beings, an analogy that will fully resonate, as pointed out before, in the penultimate stanza, where the word ‘baby’ will have the ambiguity of referring to an actual baby or to the baby carrier. All these ambiguities are negotiated by the verb “gardening,” which introduces the literal meaning from which one extrapolates the analogies; what is remarkable is that the act of gardening, contrary to Ellis’ assumptions, is focused on a personal matter, not just on communal treatment of certain plants. A gardener sometimes decides what are weeds and what are flowers based on particular conventions; but that is an external act, and what this song does is present the problem by turning the external garden into an analogy of one’s own life: how do we decide what are weeds and what are flowers? No matter what the context is, sometimes, as a gardener, one has to make the lonely choice of treating baby’s breath as a weed or as a flower against the prevailing consensus of one’s community; sometimes there are no interpretative communities able to make the decision for us and, similarly, occasionally there is no one to tell us whether we made the right or wrong decision. We learn by experience, naturally, but it is not an innocent learning; it is not a case where just by looking one way one sees certain features erasing other features, it is a case where behaving in accordance with some features will bring about consequences. Retrospectively we might have done everything right and discover we acted wrongly because the meaning that elicited the action had changed.

Even more distressing, as implied by the use given to baby’s breath in the second stanza, is the fact the baby’s breath will always have both features stuck to it, it will always be a flower and it will always be a weed: “A crowning lace above her face / That’ll last a day before it turns to hay”; finally, it is not just distressing its use as a flower is

perishable but that its perishability changes it yet again into a new use, “hay.” The implication Callahan is introducing in the song is not just that decisions about the meaning of things have consequences but that moral decisions about the meaning of certain things affecting one’s life can be made wrong by the ability things have to change their essence. Trying to explain his approach to *Apocalypse*, Callahan introduces a comparison with another artist:

I don’t know if you saw that Pollock movie? That type of approach to art where you just destroy yourself and your loved ones, like dying for your art—I think I used to embrace that philosophy. But lately, especially with this last record, I’ve been trying to—because I don’t want to die alone—find a new way of still making good work, but not at the expense of the rest of your life. (Hyden)

What is implied here, not only with the analogy with the film about Jackson Pollock’s life but mainly with the remark about the fear of dying alone, is the relation his songs were having with reality was affecting his life; somehow, writing about his own life brought about problems in his dealings with other people who thought they were being addressed in the songs. In that sense, rediscovering how to write from a different perspective, with a new designation, is, again, as in so many other examples, an act of preservation. The disjunctive nature of those last two lines of “Baby’s Breath” are part of this preservation, in which singing is removed from the biography by the implication that reaping what one sows is what happens when one relates in a peculiar way to songs; by assuming himself as an entertainer, Callahan believes he can dismiss such complaints by assuming his work as a kind of fiction.

Still addressing *Apocalypse*, Callahan would say it was “a really inward-looking record in a way that I haven’t really done in the past;” and, complementing the thought, he referred to “the cattle” in “Drover,” the first song, as the “things inside you, so I suppose it’s about corralling the emotions” (Thompson). The cohesion of the album, at least of the notion the songs form a cohesive progression, peaks when in “One Fine Morning,” the last song of the album, Callahan sings: “And I said Hey! No more drovering! / No more drovering!” The first stanza of “Drover,” under a narrative arch, thus becomes referential to Callahan’s own work:

The real people went away  
I’ll find a better word someday  
Leaving only me and my dreams  
My cattle  
And a resonator



The real people who have gone, and whom he hopes to describe better, are exactly the people who made him “reap what he sowed”; the cattle, those inner feelings, are also echoes of memories of those persons, but persons who have changed and evolved making those songs’ meanings obsolete. About this cattle, Callahan sings: “But the pain and the frustration is not mine / It belongs to the cattle / through the valley”; and the song ends with the line “My cattle bears it all away for me and everyone.” So when he sings about no more drovering in that last song, what he is implying is that he wants to hold no more responsibility for that cattle, as if the cattle stood for an inability to change, to evolve as real people (hence the first line of the album, “the real people went away”); it is not only that songs have been surpassed by events, it is Callahan himself who has a different point of view over what the songs depict, as if they did not belong to who he is anymore. In a way, the songs become commodities in the performer’s show, just as baby’s breath turns into hay when it dies, thus acquiring another utility by perishing.

There is one last resounding word in the songs of *Apocalypse* and with it I want to try to make all the loose ends of my argument come together; the word is precisely the title of the album, “Apocalypse,” which first surfaces in the song “Riding for the Feeling.” The song is a description of a live performance, of how the relationship with other human beings is empty for most of the time one stands in front of an audience:

I asked the room if I’d said enough  
No one really answered  
They just said Don’t go, Don’t go  
All this leaving is never ending  
I kept hoping for one more question  
Or for someone to say  
Who do you think you are?  
So I could tell them

In an interview to Alex Denney, Callahan offered an explanation for the song: it was about a professor or a lecturer who goes around talking to people; the hope for one more question seems to confirm this but, again, ambiguity is stressed when Callahan sings the stanza where “apocalypse” occurs:

With the TV on mute  
I’m listening back to the tapes  
On the hotel bed  
My my my apocalypse

The choice of character is already suspicious in its approximation to what Callahan, as a singer, does (a professor/lecturer is someone who performs for audiences); but this

stanza, about listening back to tapes brings together character and author. I think that is an ambiguity Callahan is happy to explore by the repetition of the pronoun “my”; but further on, if we look at the second occurrence of the word in the album, in “One Fine Morning,” we find another reason to highlight the ambiguity:

Yeah, it's all coming back to me now  
My apocalypse!  
The curtain rose and burned in the morning sun  
And the mountains bowed down like a ballet  
Like a ballet of the heart  
One fine morning

I think the apocalypse in relation to “tapes” and to “the curtain” rising is a reference to the past work, just as “cattle” stood for the emotions and the real people depicted in that work. Callahan’s concern is directed at the notion that to sing about real life might be unfair since it crystalizes a description of something which can easily change meaning. Callahan’s fear of dying alone as a consequence of how he approached his work under the designation Smog is probably best described in a passage of *Dependent Rational Animals*, where the idea of searching for a community is better articulated than it was in Ellis’ account:

We may at any point go astray in our practical reasoning because of intellectual error: perhaps we happen to be insufficiently well-informed about the particulars of our situation; or we have gone beyond the evidence in a way that has misled us; or we have relied too heavily on some unsubstantiated generalization. But we may also go astray because of moral error: we have been over-influenced by our dislike of someone; we have projected on to a situation some phantasy in whose grip we are; we are insufficiently sensitive to someone else’s suffering. And our intellectual errors are often, although not always, rooted in our moral errors. From both types of mistake the best protections are friendship and collegiality. (MacIntyre 96)

The problem with songs about real life is they encapsulate error, moral or intellectual; to turn back and see a life’s work as a collection of errors about situations and other people might, indeed, be distressing. Within this description, “Diamond Dancer” is, nine years after the release of Cat Power’s *Moon Pix*, an acknowledgment of how people evolve continually; not only that, it is a generous description of a colleague and friend. Sometimes people just dance themselves into something else. The ability to admire from a distance, without interference and with generosity, is a way of positioning oneself as an artist and not as a mere entertainer.

## Strange Fruit

It might have been supposed the flirtation with literature, or with literature-related subjects, necessarily happens under the proximity of literary figures or, at least, of literary objects; but it is not necessarily so and many of our daily dealings are similar to the dealings of literary specialists. The classic opposition to the formalist notion about special linguistic treatments in literature says we use such processes in our day-to-day language and so they are not specific to literature. What I now want to do is to look at two versions of the same song performed by the same author in different moments of her career and to speak about the differences in each version. My argument is that literary processes naturally accompany certain activities, whether one expects it or not; the metaphorical treatment of language, for instance, taken as a literary process, is a natural way of dealing with songs. The song I want to look at is Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," an important song in the singer's career and one that has been widely discussed in a tone different from the one used here. My claim is the two versions to be dealt with are, essentially, different and we must consider them as two different objects altogether; what interests me is the way Holiday treats the song in different periods of her career and how these different treatments might affect the song's meaning. My concern, then, is not with the social implications of the song in American society, although I am aware of such implications; I am not interested in the social questions raised by the song not because I believe them to be in any way trivial but only because they have been amply covered in many other studies.

In one of the live recordings of "Strange Fruit," Billie Holiday claims that the song was written specially for her. This claim goes even further in her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, where she describes the process of writing and arranging the song:

It was during my stint at Café Society that a song was born which became my personal protest—"Strange Fruit." The germ of the song was in a poem written by Lewis Allen [sic]. I first met him at Café Society. When he showed me that poem, I dug it right off. It seemed to spell out all the things that had killed Pop.

Allen [sic], too, had heard how Pop died and of course was interested in my singing. He suggested that Sonny White, who had been my accompanist, and I turn it into music. So the three of us got together and did the job in about three weeks. I also got a wonderful assist from Danny Mendelsohn, another writer who had done arrangements for me. He helped me with arranging the song and rehearsing it patiently. I worked like the devil on it because I was never sure I could put it across or that I could get across to a plush night-club audience the things that it meant to me. (Holiday 94)

David Margolick, in his study of the song, *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song* (2001), sets the record straight and clarifies the true origin of the song. The poem was originally written by Lewis Allan, the penname of Abel Meeropol, a New York teacher, and published for the first time, in 1937, in the union paper *New York Teacher*, under the title “Bitter Fruit.” Margolick establishes the poem was printed before Allan and Holiday ever met and it was even put into song and performed publicly by other singers, among them Allan’s wife, before it came to Holiday in 1939. The song was recorded by Holiday that same year and released by Commodore in agreement with Holiday’s official publisher, Columbia, which feared the public consequences the song might bring.

Having clarified the real authorship of the song, one question arises: why would Holiday describe the song as having been written especially for her or even that it was co-written by her? One way to answer this question is to concentrate on the crucial importance the song had in Holiday’s career and how the true identity of the song was set by Holiday’s voice, an imprecise but nonetheless true claim. If we add to this claim the numerous problems Holiday had to face in several occasions when she tried to perform the song, we might start to understand why the song and the singer seem to belong to each other. The racial question exposed in the song is an obvious factor as to why the relation between Holiday and the song is so tight and one must keep in mind that although lynchings in the South were not as common as they had been in the past, segregation was (and would remain) a social issue throughout Holiday’s career. But despite everything said about the relation between Holiday and “Strange Fruit,” one must still note how the poem is constantly erased from the discussion, as if it had no autonomy by itself; this is due, in part, to its obvious message, leaving little room for ambiguity and therefore raising no problems of interpretation.

Allan’s poem declares itself as part of a pastoral tradition describing a scene where the natural elements one would expect in such a scene are combined with the description of a lynching. From the title on, the idea is to merge the image of the hanged body with the image of a fruit and, in that way, it seems the poem is trying to clarify the metaphor in the title. Allan uses symmetry in order to balance the natural elements and the “strange” elements; by using this structure, Allan expects the two descriptions will be sufficiently balanced so that one will not overcome the other. The system is fairly clear in the first two stanzas, where a line describing natural elements is balanced by a line describing the lynching (“Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root”); the same happens when the description is contained within a smaller

unit and so half a line with natural elements is balanced with another half line describing the lynching (“Black body swinging—in the Southern breeze”). The balance also comes from the relation between the senses used in each description, and so the smell of magnolia is in relation with the smell of burning flesh just as the body swinging is in relation with the Southern breeze making it swing. The only hesitation in Allan’s structure comes in the fourth line of the second stanza, where we are surprised by the adverb “then,” which seems to reintroduce the anomaly of the lynching. This anomaly might explain why some reconstructions of the poem replace “then” with “and,” since the logic of the poem’s structure asks for an enumeration instead of a progression. But even with this variation, the “sudden” which follows it is still awkward within the poem’s structure. Since the title’s metaphor has been duly explained in the first two stanzas, the third stanza is just built upon several images which give account of time passing. The process allows Allan to describe the pastoral scene with the lynching as another natural element; the hesitation in the fourth line of the second stanza seems to come only as a reminder of the difficulty the poet has set for himself.

Nonetheless, one just has to listen to Holiday’s first version for all this talk about Allan’s poem to collapse; there’s nothing in Holiday’s performance which might suggest the slightest division, symmetric or other, between the several elements of the poem. Despite this smoothing of the poem’s structure, with her voice and her soft delivery being simply underlined by the music, Holiday’s first version is closer to the poem’s goal than it would seem. The rough edges of Allan’s poem disappear underneath Holiday’s steady delivery and the two parts, the natural elements and the lynching, come together as one single scene (the problem with the fourth line of the second stanza is barely noticeable). The only moment in this version where Holiday’s voice changes is in the third stanza, where the enumeration allows for vocal modulations without compromising the meaning of the poem, already dealt with in the first and second stanzas. This means “Strange Fruit” might be as much a creation of Holiday as Allan’s but also that that creation is made within the performance and not from the particular relation between the singer and the song. However, if we look at the 1956 version, published in the album *Lady Sings the Blues*, the symmetric construction of the poem is evident. Given as an example of Holiday’s late style and of how her vocal delivery developed, this version stands as a favorite among Holiday’s fans; the smoothness of the voice is gone and her vocal technique is closer to modern jazz tendencies of the period. In this version, she clearly separates the poem into its parts showing the contrast

between natural elements and the description of the lynching in a more obvious way. Along with the changes in the vocal performance, the music now features a horn introduction echoing the more histrionic style of the vocal performance (the music works as an echo of the voice in both versions, accompanying the vocal style).

The differences between the two versions are so obvious it would be fairly easy to acknowledge them as two different objects just based on the technical differences; but there is more to it than the mere technical differences, hence I would like to put forward the notion these are in fact two different objects not only on that account but mainly because they are about two different things. While in the first version Holiday sings about lynchings in the South, in the second version she is singing about herself. This autobiographical inflexion might be described as a necessary development of the singer's career, and we can look at the way her voice and her technique changed and accept that such a different version, because it records those changes, is necessarily a testimony of her own career. There is no question this is true and from that point of view the later version is undoubtedly autobiographical, however this fails to account for the full story. If we take this meaning of "autobiographical" seriously, then we would have to say that, for instance, Sinatra's singing of "New York" would be in a similar position and we are dealing with different songs when we talk about different versions of Sinatra singing "New York." It is always possible to place late versions of that song under a Freudian description (as it is possible to place anything under a Freudian description), but apart from that it is hard to imagine Sinatra is not singing about New York when he performs the song, even during "his effortful last years" (Ross 221). This is a very trivial position but one to take into account.

In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson explains one of the "tricks" of the pastoral is to talk about the author or the person to whom the poem is addressed to while pretending to be talking about something completely different:

One might connect it with that curious trick of pastoral which for extreme courtly flattery—perhaps to give self-respect to both poet and patron, to show that the poet is not ignorantly easy to impress, nor the patron to flatter—writes about the poorest people; and with those jazz songs which give an intense effect of luxury and silk underwear by pretending to be about slaves naked in the field. (Empson 98)

The analogy with the jazz songs is particularly interesting if we consider "Strange Fruit" as an example. The song is not exactly the kind of song Empson is referring to but in a very literal sense Empson's description comes very close to capture what one feels when hearing late versions of the song. By his account, in Holiday's case we would have two

kinds of pastoral: in the first version we have a very straightforward pastoral, and Holiday is singing about naked slaves in the field using the kind of language one would expect to find in a pastoral poem; in the second version, we would have something very similar to what Empson describes and Holiday is only pretending to sing about slaves in the field. If we believe in several stories about the performance of this song, as told in Holiday's autobiography, it is this effect, curiously enough, Holiday's fans expected:

Over the years I've had a lot of weird experiences as a result of that song. It has a way of separating the straight people from the squares and cripples. One night in Los Angeles a bitch stood right up in the club where I was singing and said, "Billie, why don't you sing that sexy song you're so famous for? You know, the one about the naked bodies swinging in the trees." (Holiday 95)

Holiday exposes her frustration towards people who do not imagine literal slaves naked in the fields as if the failing of imagination would define the listener as a "square" or "cripple." The mere idea of someone thinking about the song as beautiful is awkward to Holiday.

Another trivial point would be to claim Holiday's second version is more autobiographical than the first because it somehow has more sentiment (something people claim based on the vocal qualities of the versions, where histrionic screaming has more sentimental resonance than smooth vocal delivery). It is hard to believe Holiday puts more feeling in the later version; on the contrary, it seems the respect she has for what the poem is saying is more evident in the first version where she struggles to adjust her performance to the solemnity of the poem's theme. Although Margolick quotes Barney Josephson to dispute Holiday's awareness of what "Strange Fruit" was about, one must not dismiss the feeling she must have put into it: "She sang it just as well when she didn't know what it was about" (Margolick 29). Even if Holiday was not fully aware of what she was singing about when she first came in touch with the song, it is hard to imagine she kept ignorant for much longer; if she did not fully grasp the meaning of "pastoral," she clearly understood the implications of what she was singing. Late in her life, in a story many have quoted, Holiday defined "pastoral" to Maya Angelou's son in the following terms: "It means when the crackers are killing the niggers. It means when they take a little nigger like you and snatch off his nuts and shove them down his goddam throat. That's what it means" (Margolick 107). The violence of this definition of "pastoral" shows her weariness in having had to deal for so many years with something which seemed so obvious to her and that others still failed to understand—that "Strange Fruit" was a song about lynchings in the south; it also shows no matter what you sing or

how you sing something, there are always doubts about what one says. This is crucial to understand how Holiday learned things are not always as simple as one might expect.

Some of the people who accompanied Holiday's career have expressed doubts about the quality of the song, claiming the theme of the poem outweighs everything else; quoted in Margolick's study of the song, Martin Williams expresses his doubts about the song: "Moving propaganda, perhaps, but not poetry and not art" (60). Again, the problem seems to relate to what the song says and what one would expect to hear from Holiday. Art, according to Williams, does not exist within the realm of politics; but above all, it does not exist when the things said are supposed to be taken in their literal sense. If all that Holiday has to say with "Strange Fruit" is what it is said in the poem, then that cannot be looked at as art. Questions about what passes as art are never prominent in Holiday's mind, and her problem with the song is always what people understand and how people feel about what she sings. If we take into account Holiday's frustration with the way the song was being understood, it is possible to recognize the changes made in the later version as an attempt to reintroduce the original meaning of the poem and, as a consequence, to introduce an ethical correction to the smoothness (and literalness) of the first version. That would explain why the lines are broken in their smaller parts making Allan's symmetrical structure more explicit; but where Allan's idea of structure seemed to have as a goal the blending of the two descriptions, in Holiday's later version the separation between natural elements and the description of the lynching seems an attempt to isolate those two realms so, in that way, they can come across for what they truly are.

Putting the two versions side by side, the only difference is the introduction of the contraction of the verb in the last line: "Here's a strange and bitter crop." This apparently meaningless detail shows informality towards the original poem which should be underlined. The contraction Holiday introduces puts "strange and bitter crop" in direct relation to the singer and makes "here" report to the singer: here is someone who is strange and bitter; in the original poem "here" refers to the poem itself and comes as the conclusion of the description portrayed in it: here is a poem speaking of a strange and bitter crop. This means that, with one simple contraction, all the language of the poem becomes retrospectively metaphorical; suddenly, all the descriptions, whether of natural elements or the lynching, gain an ambiguity not present in the first version. In a way, what Holiday discovered and learned throughout her career was words do not always mean what we expect them to mean and that the words in this song were a good



description of her own life if she did not take them in their literal sense. From the first to the second version, Holiday realized songs might work in the way Empson describes pastoral poems and her audience was already expecting things to work in that way. It is as if Holiday had learned a basic lesson in literary criticism: words do not always mean what they are supposed to mean. If this is true, then Holiday's mistakes about the origin of the song should not be looked at as mistakes but as part of the illusion trick which turns the song into a song about Holiday herself. How could a song be so explicitly about her if it was not written by or for her? To say she wrote the song is acknowledging the song is about her and not about naked slaves in the field; it is also an acknowledgment that, by being so, it is different from the first so-called "version," let alone the so-called "poem."

This intuition is reinforced in Margolick when he discloses Holiday wanted her autobiography to have the expression "bitter crop" in the title. It was her publisher who insisted the main word in the title should be "blues": "the publisher insisted that 'blues' was in the title, though Holiday herself had favored the last words of 'Strange Fruit': 'bitter crop'" (16). Holiday understood "bitter crop" was a good description of her own life and how could she not? As Margolick puts it, she became the song: "Holiday performed it again in London in February 1959, in a televised concert that has since been excerpted in several Holiday documentaries. Haggard, largely wasted away, she had grown oddly, sadly suited to capture the full grotesqueness of the song. Now, she not only sang of bulging eyes and twisted mouths. She embodied them" (106). When Holiday first came across the song she could not imagine it would become such a perfect description of her own life, not only because she had not lived that life yet as mainly because she could not understand exactly how metaphors worked. She could have lived all her life without understanding it but somehow, along the way, things had changed. When she performed "Strange Fruit" in her final years she was fully aware she was singing about herself. Allan's intentions were long gone. Singing the song the way she did was an attempt to make her audience fully aware of how those words no longer meant what they used to; it was an attempt to say she actually had written the song.

## The Devil

John Lomax and his son, Alan Lomax, were, for many years, the most visible faces of an effort to collect the oral history of the United States of America. John had studied at Harvard under the tutelage of George Lyman Kittredge, who had himself been a student of Francis James Child, the Harvard scholar who collected the seminal volumes known as *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (published between 1882 and 1898); both Child and Kittredge are counted among the most important scholars to have brought folklore tradition to the academic circles and were an influence to the young John Lomax who, in his turn, was the major influence in his son's life. Although the practice of going out in the field in search of sources was already in use, the initial academic method for gathering materials was bibliographic research. John was interested in cowboy and frontier ballads and had collected many examples of both styles directly from people who still sang them and with whom he shared experiences as a teenager in Texas; the practice of collecting songs from people who still used them in their daily activities was regarded as unreliable and, as John's career was built outside academic circles, he was mostly ostracized by scholars who deemed him a hack. Others, such as poet Carl Sandburg or the English musician Cecil Sharp,<sup>44</sup> had already begun collecting and compiling songs they considered relevant American national poetry without much care for the academic process; their work, along with the Lomaxes', would be the basis for the worldwide popularity of folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Lomaxes' efforts, nevertheless, surpass any minor attempt at collecting folklore materials, both men dedicating their whole lives to the task of gathering every variant of any song they regarded significant for the characterization of the human beings living in certain areas of the world (Alan, particularly, gathered songs from different parts of the world, broadening his range to dances and rituals later in his career). In hundreds of field trips and many hours of recordings they imposed their methods as a creditable approach to the job of collecting songs in America, both father and son becoming a very important part in the creation of the Archive of American Folk Song, at the Library of Congress.

Along with the discovery of many unknown characters who would soon be an integral part of American history, such as Lead Belly, Big Bill Bronzy or Muddy Waters,

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<sup>44</sup> Sandburg's anthology of folk songs, *American Songbag* (1927), has become a landmark; Sharp, a major figure in the British Folk Revival, spent a year in Kentucky collecting songs, a work published posthumously in 1932 under the title *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*.

both father and son always actively promoted the work of those they discovered and also organized events to showcase their talent in so that those performers could make a living off their music. Unlike collecting sources from libraries and private collections, they were dealing with human beings who had, in most cases, aspirations which lay outside the scope of being mere relics from other times. In that line, Alan believed recording the life story of each artist was as important as recording their songs; so, whenever it was possible, Alan tried to record extensive interviews in which performers ended up weaving personal stories with songs. The first and most relevant example of this practice was the work Lomax developed with Jelly Roll Morton, the jazz player, in a series of recording sessions which stretched for a month and which Alan named "Autobiography of Jelly Roll Morton"; following that example, he began making a series of recorded interviews which he catalogued as "autobiographies." As Alan's biographer notes, he was to discover, on reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, that most of the performers he interviewed talked much like Steinbeck's characters, bringing forward the novel as a touchstone not only for the Great Depression period but also for the type of characters who were to be counted in as folk performers (Szwed 124-5).

Lomax believed songs and life stories were two integral aspects of the idea each of these performers was a fragment of what made the country unique, something touching upon the basic structure the idea of nationhood stood upon, as Elijah Wald notes about the field of folklore studies:

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the whole field of folklore was still in its infancy. The idea that music created by untrained singers and players might be important, valuable art was fairly avant-garde, and very few educated people made the still greater leap to valuing it precisely because the performers were untrained. Such an idea, though, fit the spirit of America's self-image as the world's cradle of democracy, and also the Romantic movement, which celebrated the wonders of nature and "natural man." It was only a matter of time before folk songs would be hailed as the truest, deepest expression of the American people. (Wald 223)

As Wald acutely points out, collecting folklore materials can be dated back to the beginnings of the Romantic movement in Europe, when the practice of researching texts was instituted as a way of reaching back to the most original versions of materials circulating orally; while some field work was also involved, nineteenth century work on folklore lacked, nonetheless, the implications which the possibility of recording added to collecting: from the written page the collecting moved to records and to the physical presence of human beings who tell or sing their story. Before the possibility of recording, collecting materials from singers or story tellers was necessarily reduced to a compilation

of texts; as it was not uncommon for collected materials to be freely adapted by collectors, it was hard to distinguish if stories were based on a song or if they were dependent on musical accompaniment. Recording allowed to collect the many variations of those materials, registering, for instance, geographical and personal transformations; mostly, recording put the spotlight on the performer and not on the collector, giving way to new questions concerning aspects of folklore use not exclusively related to the texts: the same text might have a completely different tonality from one geographical area to another, just based on the performer's delivery or use of it, with tremendous implications in the meaning of the text. Most texts were sung and the performers were mostly untrained, learning songs from other people, usually family members or other untrained singers. The Lomaxes' work collecting and recording these performers played a relevant part, at least in the United States, in the shift of significance the music made by untrained performers was to undergo. To compensate this amateurism, and in order to confer certain respectability to the collecting of those songs, Alan always tried to demonstrate how studying folklore was dependent on and related to other fields of science, such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, or even neurobiology.

In the beginning of his work, Alan's methodology consisted of moving through the country searching for singers on the basis of rumors about a certain man or woman's ability to memorize and sing ancient songs. Used to hearing rumors about the singing abilities of characters who would never materialize or reveal themselves as not that good, it was with great surprise when, upon hearing Woody Guthrie, Alan saw the claims circulating about the singer confirmed. Woody Guthrie, born and raised in the Dust Bowl region, in Oklahoma, became the archetypal figure of the folk world: a drifter carrying a guitar on his shoulder, picking the odd job as he moved through a country plagued by the Depression, singing songs weaving fiction and reality together for money and food. While Guthrie might have had a vast repertoire of old songs, it was his ability to compose new songs which most impressed Lomax: "Well, I realized, listening to this song, that I was meeting a guy who was a ballad maker, in the same sense as the people who made 'Jesse James', and 'Casey Jones', and all the ballads that I spent my life trying to find and preserve for the American people. I thought they were from anonymous people. Well, here was Mr. Anonymous singing to me" (Szwed 157-8).<sup>45</sup> The idea that American literature was dependent on English sources and that, as such, the idea of a national literature would always be tainted was part of the reason why identifying songs

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<sup>45</sup> The song which Alan heard was "Pretty Boy Floyd," an original from Guthrie; among Guthrie's most popular songs are counted "Pastures of Plenty," "Talking Dust Bowl Blues," or "This Land Is Your Land."

independent from European sources was so stimulating; before Guthrie, the anonymous nature of a song implied it might have European origin, since while the themes were inherently American (cowboy songs were the most obvious example), the structure and melody were usually adaptations from common European ballads. Someone American who could create songs with the same qualities as the most ancient folk songs was a validation of America's independence even in what concerned folklore: through Guthrie, Lomax thought he had acquired a way into the original igniter of a folk song and a validation of American folklore as more than a mere variation from English (and European) folklore.

Nevertheless, Guthrie was not to live up to Lomax's expectations concerning the Romantic "natural man" who validated folk as inherently ingrained in the human psyche; soon Lomax would have to admit Guthrie was a different kind of answer to the question about the origin of folk songs:

Though he would sometimes call him a natural, Alan knew that Woody approached his songs and writing as conscientiously as any professional. He could improvise and toss off verses when he had to, but he worked hard at his writing, often deep into the night. He was not a pure product of the country, the passive heir to Anglo-Saxon tradition, but a synthesizer, a bard of a region of the country that was changing quickly. (Szwed 158)

By allowing the history of the country to be told by the lives of performers and their particular rendition of songs, Lomax had to concede, eventually, that the history of the country was, logically, the result of the fabrications to which these songs, as any other artistic production, were subjected to: there was no natural process to create songs and there might not even be much difference between writing a folk song and writing a Tin Pan Alley hit. From this perspective, folk came close to blues in the sense the popularized idea about each style attended to unmanageable notions about spontaneity and "natural" creation which could not be held when each style's body of work was analyzed. Guthrie's influence in shaping ideas about what folk music was parallels the influence Muddy Waters had on blues: as in Waters' case, explained by Wald, the popularized romantic notion was very far from reality:

That is why Leroy Carr and Lonnie Johnson have disappeared from the pantheon, along with almost every other major star of the 1920s and 1930s. They were geniuses, perhaps, but also smooth, intelligent professionals. And as we now know, that is not the blues. Blues is the image presented by Keith Richards and Mick Jagger: sex and drugs, and raw, dirty, violent, wild, passionate, angry, grungy, greasy, frightening outlaw music. (Wald 221)

Wald's reference to the notions about blues popularized by The Rolling Stones, and their association to Muddy Waters, tries to bring out the misconceptions of modern audience's notions as to what blues truly were; two of Wald's examples of those misconceptions are the claim blues was a style marked by the voice and not the guitar as its primary quality, and the notion, hinted in the quotation, that instead of a dark and obscure type of music, blues was in fact a very popular style with a commercial vitality now obfuscated by the popular romanticized version. Apart from the popularization of a type of blues by bands as The Rolling Stones, blues audiences, particularly record collectors, also played their part in changing common sensibility about the style: "By emphasizing obscurity as a virtue unto itself, they essentially turned the hierarchy of blues stardom upside-down: the more records an artist had sold in 1928, the less he or she was valued in 1958" (Wald 241). This is as true of blues as it is of folk or any other style which gains a certain amount of public notoriety.

In much the same way, the popularized version of folk had (and, to a certain degree still has) an obscure imagery associated with it which did not account for the vitality it had regionally, if not nationally; mostly, the popularized version of folk was built from a mixture between stories as depicted in songs and figures as that of Guthrie. These accounts assume songs as the natural extension of particular hard lives and dismiss that, as with the songs, much of Guthrie's tales of hard life, and his behavior in general, were also calculated for effect:

Guthrie could play the hillbilly to perfection when it suited him. He would claim that he hadn't read *The Grapes of Wrath* or seen the movie, or would seem to be spontaneous as a jazz musician when he had prepared for hours in advance. The highbrow disguised as a primitive was a role that Alan understood and tolerated most of the time, the double disguise of the true revolutionary. Still, Woody could drive those around him crazy with his offstage posturing, sleeping on the floor, refusing to eat at a table, declining to bathe. Once when he came into Alan's apartment and deigned to climb into bed with wet clothes and muddy boots, Alan erupted: "Your lumpenproletariat act is too much, Woody! Grow up." Guthrie seemed to be driven to test those around him, pushing them to reveal the extent of their belief in him. (Szwed 159)

Songs as the product of intense work had already been a blow to Lomax's ideas about the "natural" man's ability to burst out songs; that the man's behavior was also something calculated was an even greater disappointment. However, Alan was ready to acknowledge Guthrie's behavior was a way of validating his work and, in a very particular sense, an extension of the honesty he felt was needed to sing the kind of songs he did. Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, was another piece of fiction adding to the image of the hobo he so actively sought; as the autobiography implies by fictionalizing

whenever possible, an important part of being a folk singer was the idea one had lived the stories depicted in the songs; trumpeting not to have read *The Grapes of Wrath* was a statement of authenticity: he was not copying the novel, the novel was documenting him (or his way of life).

It was in search of this man that Bob Dylan arrived in New York, in January of 1961. By that time Guthrie had already been diagnosed with Huntington's disease, a genetic disorder which causes progressive debilitation, and was mostly confined to his hospital room (Guthrie would die from the disease in 1967). Like Dylan, others had come in search of Guthrie, to pay respects as well as to learn from him; many had shaped themselves on his image, most famously Ramblin' Jack Elliott (himself, as Dylan, born into a Jewish family), and Dylan was just one of those who copied Guthrie's style of singing (claims are made Dylan even copied Guthrie's way of speaking<sup>46</sup>). To have his name inscribed in the folk pantheon Guthrie presided over, Dylan lied his way into the folk scene developing in Greenwich Village (a folk scene based, ironically, on the commercial success of songs as The Weavers' "Goodnight Irene"—a version of a Lead Belly's song—, or The Kingston Trio's "Tom Dooley"). Dylan was known for intricate stories about his past involving extensive travels, elusive stories about running away from home, joining carnivals, as well as, obviously, a lot of train hopping. When he was becoming a notorious character in the midst of the national popularity of the folk movement, his life became the target of journalistic scrutiny and in November 1963, in a now famous *Newsweek* article by Andrea Svedberg, all the made-up stories were examined by the reporter's investigation; Svedberg's article questioned, for instance, Dylan's public declarations about being estranged from his parents by noting Dylan had sent them tickets for his important show at Carnegie Hall.<sup>47</sup> The article claimed Dylan "grew up in a conventional home, and went to conventional schools," asserting he "shroud[ed] his past in contradictions" (Andrea Svedberg quoted in Bell 282); it also explained Dylan's true name was Robert Zimmerman and that he had adopted the name "Dylan" in honor of the poet Dylan Thomas.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Marjorie Guthrie, Woody's ex-wife, believed the slurred manner of speaking Dylan and other young singers copied from Guthrie was the first sign of Huntington's disease (Soules 89).

<sup>47</sup> Andrea Svedberg's article also implied Dylan was not the real author of "Blowin' in the Wind," a claim eventually refuted by the man who had claimed to be its author, Lorre Wyatt (at the time a high school student); the article is said to have influenced the song "Restless Farewell" (*The Times They Are Changin'*, 1964).

<sup>48</sup> The origin of the name is not clear: Dylan has made many contradictory statements about the case and testimonies from friends add to the contradictions; before coming up with the name Dylan, he had thought about using Dillion and later, for one of his teenage years' band, he used the stage name Elston Gunn. Officially, he changed his name to Bob Dylan in August 1962.

The name change, something fairly common at the time, along with the elaborate narrative of his past life, were seen as a dishonest attitude, but David Hajdu acutely observes all the lies and myths had, in Dylan, a relation to his own ideas about what a song implied at the time: “The irony of Robert Zimmerman’s metamorphosis into Bob Dylan lies in the application of so much elusion and artifice in the name of truth and authenticity” (73). Dylan’s lies about extensive travels and associations with itinerant carnivals were part of the artifice which was identified by Alan Lomax in Guthrie, a way of standing up for his ideas about what a folk singer was. In the same vein, the political songs and political rallies’ appearances were part of a required behavior for a folk musician, a way to fit in. Dylan soon realized those political postures were as much a creation as were Guthrie’s “natural” songs and behavior: under the pretense of “authenticity,” what these people were doing was refusing to play other parts, such as the part of the successful musician or intellectual artist. When Dylan parted ways with the folk movement by making songs closer to the rock and roll format, using electric guitars and a band instead of the expected acoustic guitar, he was assuming his identity was stronger and more precious than communal belonging.

The albums’ titles from 1965 and 1966 are not always mentioned with as much significance as they should, although they seem to hold a programmatic disposition. About *Bringing All Back Home* (1965), Howard Sounes claims the title was a reference to The Beatles having resuscitated rock and roll and so the album’s title refers to bringing rock and roll, an American style, to its birthplace: “With *Bringing It All Back Home*—the album title was reference to the fact that this was American music British groups had borrowed—Bob recorded his songs with rock ‘n’ roll backing, demonstrating to musicians everywhere that they could also express their deepest feelings in rock ‘n’ roll songs” (171). Nevertheless, there seems to be some ambiguity about the scope of the title, as if it referred also to Dylan’s being away from home, eliciting the album’s electric nuances as a return to Dylan’s own roots (most biographers, and Dylan himself, emphasize often the relevance rock and roll had in the singer’s formative years). *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) evokes not only the highway connecting the south of the country with Dylan’s north,<sup>49</sup> but mainly a musical tradition in which songs referring to highways on the title were common. To propose a revisiting of such tradition in the title of an album seems to be relevant, particularly if one attends to the way traditional musical structures are shaken by the many different layers of allusion in the lyrics. *Highway 61 Revisited* is,

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<sup>49</sup> The road stretched from New Orleans to Minnesota, near to Dylan’s birthplace: “Highway 61, the main thoroughfare of the country blues, begins about where I came from... Duluth to be exact” (Dylan 240).



naturally, an extension of thoughts about the American musical tradition, but also of other American traditions, such as the literary and cinematographic traditions it constantly alludes to. Finally, the apparent nonsense title *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) might be looked at as announcing the lyrical exuberance which makes up its songs; but it also can be seen as a consequence of the more intellectual relationships encircling Dylan in that period of the 1960s,<sup>50</sup> namely the proximity with Allen Ginsberg and the Beat writers:

*Blonde on Blonde* was, and remains, a gigantic peak in Dylan's career. From more than a dozen angles, it describes basic, not always flattering, human desire and the inner movements of an individual being in the world. The lyric manuscripts from the Nashville sessions show Dylan working in a 1960s mode of what T. S. Eliot had called, regretfully, the dissociation of sensibility—cutting off the discursive thought or wit from poetic value, substituting emotion for coherence. (Wilentz 125)

The album goes so far as to allow for the traditional folk roots to be completely overlooked: folk does not seem to fit in and even its most similar specimen, “Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands,” with its eleven minutes, is but mocking tradition. It is true at some moments it seems “Allen Ginsberg, an ad hoc member of the ballooning Dylan entourage, drifts in and out of the background, as if to validate that all this subterraneanism is poetic” (Hajdu 250), but reducing Ginsberg's influence to a mere validation figure does not do justice to the way Ginsberg, and the Beats, influenced Dylan.

A reason to doubt Dylan's acceptance as leader and prophet of the folk generation is naturally the thin political message resting within his songs: where are the literary and philosophical truths which people constantly rave about? It did not seem clear, for instance, what a song as “Blowin' in the Wind” was really aiming at: “what is implied by those famous questions? Simply that the fundamental truths of existence are unknowable” (Bell 222). That seems very remote as a great truth which would deem the song a “philosophical hit,” as Ian Bell put it. So, when Bell says, still about “Blowin' in the Wind,” that “the very fact that those famous questions are rhetorical is, of course, a statement” (222), he seems to be instinctively admitting something counterintuitive: how can a set of questions with no answers state anything, particularly when they are sung? Later on in his work on Dylan, Bell will repeat everything “about Dylan was a statement, whether he knew it or not” (411), betraying his first point about statements as just another of those trivial remarks which eventually come up in conversations about

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<sup>50</sup> As Sounes notes, Dylan's original intention for the cover of the album was to use an image from a photography session held at Lawrence Ferlinghetti's bookstore, City Lights, in 1965; the session took place during a reunion of Beat Poets “that was billed as the Last Gathering of the Beat Poets” (Sounes 198-9).

Dylan's career. But in 1962, the song was, in fact, a stupendous statement and the first question is very telling about Dylan's personal life if one remembers Dylan had not walked as many roads as he claimed he had: how many roads must one walk before one can be called a man? The problems posed by "Blowin' in the Wind" are reminiscent of an argument John Hollander holds, in *Melodious Guile*, about the nature and value of rhetorical questions in poetry; discussing William Blake's "The Tyger," Hollander tries to distinguish between posing rhetorical questions and using rhetorical questions in a poetic manner. Explaining Blake's "The Tyger" holds a close relation with the painting accompanying it, Hollander demonstrates, stretching his argument to the tradition of *ekphrastic* poems, that "poetic (rather than more literal or oratorical) sort of rhetorical question must be given to the text itself" (34)—the paintings the poems refer to cannot answer the questions; this being so, rhetorical questions used in a poetic manner are only apparently rhetorical, being addressed and answered by the poems they figure in.

The analogy with Dylan's song lies in the relation words bear to music, just as in Blake's poem the words bear a relation to the painting; there is play of "give-and-take" (32) between words and music in Dylan as there is in Blake, in which one aspect complements the other rather than just illustrating it (at least in the best works, one suspects). Dylan's song addresses itself in the sense it is a song about validation: the *uber* question it poses is how many songs like this must the author write and sing before he can be called a singer? Imagining the answers to the song lie outside the scope of the song is the typical political reading which many tried to inflict on Dylan's first years; the opposite position, the idea the song poses inarticulate questions not meant to be answered, implies a bleakness that just cannot explain the song's lure. About Blake's poem, after addressing just the first two stanzas, Hollander exclaims: "What is instructively infuriating about the speaker of this dramatic monologue is how many poetic questions he virtually forces us to ask: like all madmen with whom we have intimately to deal, he tends to enlist us actively, as well as passively, in what used to be called his "paranoid pseudo-community" (33). While Blake's poem builds tension by changing the rhythm within the lines, the "maddening" aspect in Dylan is exactly the regularity of the structure, with that refrain constantly reaffirming the listener's ignorance: the answer is clearly in the wind, do you not hear it? It is in the wind running everywhere as it is in the wind blowing through the singer's lips (singing the song itself is the answer); in Dylan's song, the passive and active enlisting in Blake's "paranoid pseudo-community" is established by the refrain, identifying the place where the answer

can be attained but not stating what the answer is—the answer is clearly attainable but never verifiable except by those mad enough to publicly claim to have heard it (the folk community, which made the song into a sort of anthem, clearly believed to have heard the answers). Hollander’s conclusion about Blake’s poem is thus much closer to explaining “Blowin’ in the Wind” than any conversation about statements, political positions, or triviality; it explains Dylan’s vitality and relevance by removing the philosophical implications in favor of his poetic qualities.<sup>51</sup>

Implying Dylan’s literary qualities are the main reason for his success and importance is, naturally, naive, particularly if one believes his poetic qualities lie within the mere use of words: “Arguably, in fact, few of us are in a position now to *read* Dylan’s greatest poems: the tunes are in our heads, impossible to shift” (Bell 560). The literary qualities are just one aspect of his significance and in many ways it is easy to understand why they are relevant: they are a reflection not just of the shift towards more literary influences during his rock and roll period, but also of a certain way of thinking about the writing process. Dylan’s attempts at publishing a book, for instance, were part of his flirting with literary figures. Written in that prolific period between 1964 and 1966, *Tarantula* would only be released officially in 1971 (it circulated as a bootleg years before that). Clinton Heylin refers to it as uniquely Dylanesque work: “Whatever *Tarantula*’s antecedents—and a healthy dose of the beats lies therein—its symbolism was uniquely Dylan’s, so uniquely his that he soon began to realize that his book was little more than a series of in-jokes that would be lost on those literary critics waiting for an excuse to denigrate the so-called bard of the airwaves” (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 197). Ian Bell also recognizes the book as the written image of Dylan, adding: “that despised little book was an essential preparation for the songs written in the period between 1964 and 1966. It was Dylan’s laboratory” (375). But the literary quality of the work is very poor and one cannot look at it without a certain amount of contempt: it is a musician’s fancy, as his movies would be later in his career. Yet, it is very like a writer to experiment before arriving at a final poem and in that sense, while seemingly spontaneous in the studio, Dylan’s methodology required as much work as Guthrie put into his own songs: to look natural takes a lot of work.

As noted earlier, Nik Cohn’s history of the early years of pop music looks at Dylan as a Devil-like figure who ruined the innocence which made original rock and roll from the 1950s, and its variations, exciting. Bell puts it better when he says Dylan took “a

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<sup>51</sup> Probably not coincidentally, Hollander implies Blake’s poem is close to the ballad structure by ending with the repetition of the opening stanza.

by-product of the entertainment business, the pop song, and turned it into a literary form” (22); in the same vein, Joan Baez once described Dylan in this manner: “Bob was nosing around a stand-up ashtray on the other side of the lobby, looking, to the artistic eye, like a poet, but to the untrained eye, more like a bum” (Baez 91). What Bell and Baez take as a form of flattery, Cohn takes as an offense; while many see the epithet “poet” as a compliment, Cohn sees it as a problem: poets take the fun out of fun. Used to look at bands as ensembles of nicely dressed men (preferably in three piece suits), exuding a certain style and respectability, the idea of someone looking like a bum assuming such a god-like status in the musical world was also beyond Cohn’s comprehension. However, the relation between literary forms and popular forms (close to the relation between high and low art) is much harder to distinguish than Cohn’s reproach of Dylan might lead us into thinking. In Guthrie’s autobiography, there is a moment where he takes a whole paragraph to enumerate the people he could find in the bars of Skid Row, when he was playing for money along with Cisco Kid:

Movie people, boss wranglers, dead enders, stew bums; stealers, dealers, sidewalk spielers; con men, sly flies, flat foos, reefer riders; dopers, smokers, boiler stokers; sailors, whalers, bar flies, brass railers; spittoon tuners, fruit-tree pruners; cobblers, spiders, three-way riders; honest people, fakes, vamps and bleeders; saviors, saved, and side-street singers; whore-house hunters, door-bell ringers; footloosers, rod riders, caboosers, outsiders; honky tonk and whiskey setters, tight-wads, spendthrifts, race-horse betterers; blackmailers, gin soaks, comers, goers; good girls, bad girls, teasers, whores; buskers, corn huskers, dust bowlers, dust panners; waddlers, toddlers, dose packers, syph carriers; money men, honey men, sad men, funny men; ramblers, gamblers, highway anklers; cowards, brave guys, stools and snitches; nice people, bastards, sonsabitches; fair, square, and honest folks; low, sneaking greedy people; and somewhere, in amongst all of these Skid Row skidders—Cisco and me sung for our chips. (Guthrie 258)

Guthrie’s implication he knows all these people who have “hats pulled down over the face” (258), as he puts it in the previous paragraph, is not just that he understands a particular geographical region where he moves along, but that he knows the country he was born in; however, the style in which he does this is reminiscent of the encompassing energy of Whitman, the same energy the Beat generation would emulate a decade later. Sounes suggests, probably correctly, this paragraph is echoed in “Subterranean Homesick Blues” (71), by direct reference but also by attempting to fit the idiosyncrasies of the country within the song (or the paragraph, or the poem). More than the echo which Sounes implies from Guthrie’s “stealers, dealers, sidewalk spielers” to Dylan’s “But users, cheaters / Six-time losers,” there is the matter of the tone and the rhythm which Guthrie establishes by dividing his enumeration with the use of the semicolon. And so we have a relation of high art (Whitman) with low art (Guthrie would not count as high art, even

after writing an autobiography), which gives way to the literary pretensions of the Beats, which gives way to the great figure of low art that is Dylan: where can one draw the exact lines that separate these things?

What Dylan represented which was so revolting to Cohn was the idea music was attached to a personality and, thus, became volatile as the reflection of most personalities would require;<sup>52</sup> with Elvis, as with other rock and roll pioneers, things seemed to work the other way around: it was music which appeared to define character. The revolution Elvis brought along was a physical relation to the music, while Dylan's revolutionary standpoint was intellectual; the need to think about a song was a step backwards when compared to just feeling songs (at least according to Cohn's position). But as Sean Wilentz remarks, "what Presley had done with his body and his voice, Dylan was doing with his words—coy, conversational, and comical, feeding the youth conspiracy of candid pleasure (and pleasure candor) but with jesting gentle persuasion" (96). In 1988, Bruce Springsteen, in a speech delivered at Bob Dylan's induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, would again push the parallel between Dylan and Elvis: "Dylan was a revolutionary. Bob freed your mind the way that Elvis freed your body." Elvis might have done things to the body, but Dylan did things with words; it was not just adding literary references which made the difference, it was building songs where he did things with words one would only expect to find in poems. Cohn's instinct perfectly identifies the rupture Dylan brought about but fails to see it as having the same nature as that brought about by Elvis: both figures became the touchstones for a generation of music consumers, and it was to a change in the touchstone of his generation Cohn was reacting to.<sup>53</sup>

The comparison between Dylan and Elvis is, nonetheless, a comparison between the impact both singers had on music, not between their abilities; in a provocative parenthetical observation, Wilentz reads into *John Wesley Harding's* liner notes a much more reasonable, although counterintuitive, comparison:

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<sup>52</sup> As seen before, particularly through the case of Morrissey, not all personalities are volatile.

<sup>53</sup> "Seven year seems nothing but it's really surprisingly much. After all, one pop generation really only lasts four years, the time it takes to get from eleven to fifteen and, again, from fifteen to nineteen, and a seven-year cycle means that a whole generation gets skipped.

Why does it work like that? Probably because seventeen year-olds are up too close to things, they don't see straight. When someone like Elvis first explodes, they buy his records and copy his looks but it goes no deeper, it's only imitation.

With fourteen years-olds, however, it becomes a big part of growing up—Elvis is their great adolescent hero, he's central. They buy their first suit and have their first sex and promote their first hangover with him in the background. And then they have five years in which they can distance him, get him in perspective and absorb him deeply. So when they come to do things themselves, they don't ape him but use him to form their answers" (Cohn 77).

(In a disarming little story about three jolly kings that became the liner notes to *John Wesley Harding*, Dylan pokes fun at the Dylanologists who search for the great true meaning in his songs: “Faith is the key!” one king says. “No, froth is the key!” the second says. “You’re both wrong,” says the third, “the key is Frank!” In the story, the third king is right, sort of—but who would have ever imagined that Frank might turn out to be someone like Sinatra?) (Wilentz 269)

Although seeming counterintuitive, lately Dylan has certainly pushed for the comparison, not only by releasing a Christmas album, *Christmas in the Heart* (2009), inscribing himself in the list of singers, led by Sinatra, who were expected to deliver such albums, but also by releasing, through his website, in the summer of 2014, a cover of a Sinatra’s song (“Full Moon and Empty Arms”). The counterintuitive aspect of the comparison between the bum-like-Dylan and the smartly-dressed-Sinatra lies in the fact the former was always haunted by his lack of technical abilities as a singer, while the latter built his career solely on account of his vocal technical gifts; nonetheless, the comparison between the vocal abilities of each singer can be set on different terms if one accepts Alex Ross’s reading of Sinatra’s work upon the singer’s death:

To some extent, yes, the voice was the man. Sinatra’s “swingin’” songs act out in musical terms his Vegas persona. But the flip sides of those songs—desolate torchers like “In the Wee Small Hours,” “It’s a Lonesome Old Town,” and “September of My Years”—seem to come from nowhere. The source of that low, lonely thrum hasn’t been identified by Sinatra’s multiplying biographers; it may not have to be, because it was a musical effect, an expression of the baritone art. The voice was veering in the opposite direction from the legend: Sinatra was a lean young man who grew wealthy and stout, but it’s his younger voice that sounds plump and it’s his older voice that sounds thin and hungry. He knew all along—or at least until his effortful last years—that his voice was all that counted in the end. Now the voice is the only real thing we have left: the bright, sad man on the record player. (Ross 221)

As in Sinatra’s case, it is Dylan’s voice guiding us through the most remarkable moments of his career, with many biographers and fans still trying to identify those aspects of Dylan which keep appearing in songs as autobiographical notes but which escape actual biographic details; it is ingrained in the career of each singer they always depended on the use of their voices as a musical effect able to transpire that a life lies beyond the songs, no matter what they are about. On Sinatra, Ross adds: “We should remember his love of language—the way he dramatized words, brought dry polysyllables to life. (No other singer could make so much of the word “unphotographable.”)” (221). If there was another singer with a love for language and the ability to make the word “unphotographable” work in a song, it would have been Dylan: it is one of the Devil-like qualities he shares with Sinatra, and, alas, with poets.

## Prom Dates

Interest in the lives of public figures is not essentially different from the interest people might have in neighbors' lives; even if one claims to know one's neighbors personally makes the relation different, in many cases it is ambiguous if the knowledge we have of public figures is not superior to the knowledge of our neighbors. Distinctions between publicly and personally-known figures are in many aspects similar to the distinction one introduces between a green world and the real world: the first is just an organized version of the latter. After the popularity of rock and roll, in the 1950s, pop stars' lives rose to the status set mostly for movie stars in the first half of the century and for theater actors and actresses, or opera singers (in some cases, even writers, as Wilde so proudly flaunted), in the nineteenth century. The status of artists is not necessarily different from other public figures, say, politicians for instance, and the incidents animating each one's lives are as interesting in one case as they are in the other. What art related figures have which makes them seem different is the fact their relation to the arts stimulates stories about artistic creation; beyond their public notoriety, they produce a work which is publicly exploited as an extension of their private life and in many ways people understand the work as a path into the most reserved aspects of the artists' lives. When artists assume relationships with other artists, public interest seems to be aroused as if there were a special world artists live in; naturally, one expects the private aspects of those relationships, and of that special world, to leak into the work of each artist and, in a sense, one accompanies their artistic output as one accompanies the facts depicted in novels (or movies, or TV shows);<sup>54</sup> these relationships, as the ones in fiction, become touchstones to real relationships.

The Swedish band First Aid Kit, for instance, has a song in which they describe how these relationships are prototypes to aspire for; the song, "Emmylou" (*The Lion's Roar*, 2012) refers to Emmylou Harris' relationship with singer Gram Parsons, and parallels it with Johnny Cash's relationship with June Carter:

I'll be your Emmylou and I'll be your June  
If you'll be my Gram and my Johnny too  
No, I'm not asking much of you  
Just sing little darling, sing with me

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<sup>54</sup> The relation noted earlier about songs by Bill Callahan, Joanna Newsom, and Chan Marshall is of this kind.

The summoning of these relationships is related to the creative nature of each pairing, both consisting of the woman attending to a crisis in the man's artistic career; the plea the singer is making is for the addressee of the song to assume the artistic equivalent of the male figure in those relationships, that is, for him to take up the role of singer. The pairing is not necessarily romantic, since, while Cash and Carter were married to each other most of their lives, Parsons' and Harris' relationship was not a romantic attachment but an artistic collaboration. These relationships stand for a type of relationship the singer wants her own story to belong to; if the association were with other relationships, such as that of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, a relationship of a more destructive kind, that would sanction other kinds of connotations. Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love's relationship, for instance, is more easily compared to Sid and Nancy's, due to the level of self-destruction, than to the two examples used in First Aid Kit's song; Charles Cross' biography of Cobain attempts to retell their story as an artistic collaboration:

He read her writings, and she read his, and each was influenced by the other's musings. Courtney was a more traditional lyricist, crafting tighter and less murky lines, and her sensibility greatly shaped "Heart-Shaped Box" and "Pennyroyal Tea," among others. She made Kurt a more careful writer, and it is not by accident that these stand as two of Nirvana's most accomplished works: They were crafted with more intent than Kurt had spent on the entire *Nevermind* album. (Cross 268)

Cross' is not just an idle attempt to be more accurate about the couple's biography but a serious effort to shift their story so that it may figure in another list of stories, allowing for each one's work to be thought of in a different perspective.

The most frustrating artistic relationship between pop music stars, for audiences at any rate, was probably the one between Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. The relationship they publicly assumed during a short period in the early 1960s was the perfect artistic association and what many may have thought of as a match made in heaven. It was so perfect, in fact, that their raucous relationship throughout decades has always been looked upon as a side effect of an unresolved love affair. In many ways, Baez and Dylan's relationship continues to be a matter of discussion between fans and critics, and the level to which the relationship penetrated their works, particularly Dylan's, is still up for debate. David Kinney, commenting on how Dylan's fans tend to exhaust lyrical analysis searching for clues to the singer's biography, admits "any fool could find whatever he wanted inside the vast Dylan songbook: drugs, Jesus, Joan Baez" (186). The point on interpretation is not very original but one must note that it is at least peculiar for Joan Baez to be listed as an item people look for in Dylan's songs, particularly if one



directs one's attention towards the way the relationship has been described by both singers. Both have, in various ways, dismissed the other's influence: Dylan, throughout many interviews and public demonstrations during his career; Baez, beyond some lesser songs she wrote in the 1970s, tried to clear the matter and exert a bit of retribution in her own autobiography, *And A Voice to Sing With*.<sup>55</sup> Yet, while both singers have dismissed their relationship and its artistic results, as Kinney sharply notes, Baez is still looked for in Dylan's songs.

Joan Baez began her career as a singer at a very young age, in the coffee houses of Boston, attracting mostly college crowds: "I knew only that at age eighteen, I was not cut out for the cocktail crowd. I needed my academic, rebellious coffee-drinking admirers who listened single-mindedly to their madonna, and dared not touch her" (Baez 59). This thought already contemplated her experience singing in the famous Gate of Horn, Albert Grossman's club in Chicago, and was anticipating the success Baez seemed predestined to achieve.<sup>56</sup> Her first album, *Joan Baez* (1960), quickly reached number three in the most-sold albums chart in America and gave immediate national prominence to a folk movement she became attached to and which was, before her success, just marginal. Alan Lomax's claim the American folk revival started in 1940<sup>57</sup> might be academically correct, but in terms of public relevance it misses the mark by two decades: it was Baez's ascension to stardom which proved how it was possible to establish folk and its political agenda beyond college campuses and Greenwich Village. As all the movements rising from marginality, the idea of a counterculture reaching national audiences exposed the tension with what was considered the mainstream, as the commercial possibilities of folk's popularity were explored; public attention led the musical movement, and its political agenda, to dissolve itself in the commercial currents it set in motion: just as punk, a decade later, the 1960s counterculture would be worn-out by its own success.

In 1960, nevertheless, Baez was still the antithesis of the image female stars held; David Hajdu describes Baez's attraction in this manner:

For young women, Joan's ascetic grace and brooding musical persona appeared to serve as an antidote to the era's sexualized, glamorized formula for feminine celebrity. She was the negative image of

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<sup>55</sup> "Goodbye, Bob. You looked happy on Farm Aid. I thought maybe I shouldn't write all this stuff about you, but as it turns out, it's really about me anyway, isn't it? It won't affect you. The death of Elvis affected you. I didn't relate to that, either" (Baez 250).

<sup>56</sup> It is very telling about Baez's way of thinking that she refused to work with Grossman, claiming he represented "big management"; Grossman's was to be Bob Dylan's agent and a strong influence in the way the singer directed his career in the first half of the 1960s.

<sup>57</sup> The claim was made about the "Grapes of Wrath Evening," a folk music benefit held on March 3, 1940 (Szwed 160).

Marilyn Monroe: thin, dark, strong, smart, virtuous—still, young and attractive to men. “Girls around the same age category and even younger were just knocked out by her, because she had this waif-gipsy image,” said Barbara Dane, who had been singing folk music professionally for several years before Baez began performing. “She seemed like somebody who was absolutely free and in charge of herself, even though she was young. With the bare feet and the straight hair, she looked like this creature who could do her own thing. And that sad music—all the girls who were miserable with their lot in life were dying to cry along with her.” (Hajdu 61)

Baez’s lack of conformity to the standard notions of beauty was just another aspect of how the folk movement was moving against everything considered the acceptable norm. But Baez’s anomaly concerning the standard ideas of beauty had also personal consequences as it imprinted in her mind the sense her success was built only on the bases of her voice and her beliefs: two features she supposed inseparable. Baez’s autobiography is, likely expectedly, a wondrous tale about young boys and European counts being instantly smitten by her vocal charms; beyond that, all the momentous descriptions are reserved for the many times in which Baez’s singing led audiences to tears. The episodes are numerous and all tend towards an impossible idea about the redemptory power of music, particularly when that music is animated by Baez’s vocal chords; her argument is not that her voice has a special feature leading people to tears, but that her singing depends on her strong belief in righteous feelings and that those feelings inevitably shine through her voice: her honesty, when singing, is palpable and tear provoking.

The folk movement was to be lifted up by Baez’s success and by her strong endorsement, particularly in regards to political activism; her commitment to the folk movement was so strong she soon became the public face one associated all countercultural related things with. Her success was so relevant the accepted notions about folk changed from the 1950s to the following decade:

Part of folk’s appeal, particularly to young adults in the 1950s, was its anti-hero mythos—a sense of the music as the property of outcasts, drawn in part from the idiom’s romantic portrayal of bad men and underdogs, murderers hanged, lovers scorned, and in part from the mystique surrounding folk characters such as Woody Guthrie, the hobo roustabout, and Leadbelly [sic], an ex-convict. (Hajdu 11)

While this description accounts for the popularized romantic version of folk, from the 1960s onward, chiefly based on Baez’s success, the folk movement would come to be associated with a different kind of behavior and a different kind of image: it was no longer just a question of blending song characters with song performers, as Hajdu’s description underlines, but associating the music with a group of singers and their political struggles within the broader civil rights movement. Concerns about the impact

of these movements were not just metaphysical, as Howard Zinn suggests when noting that in 1967 the Pentagon historians were fully aware of the apprehension which civil unrest was causing in the American administration: “[Assistant Secretary of Defense John] McNaughton was also very deeply concerned about the breadth and intensity of public unrest and dissatisfaction with the war... especially with young people, the underprivileged, the intelligentsia and the women” (499). Concern with these segments of the population is a concern, mostly, with the audiences which made the folk movement popular, particularly as its political agenda mingled with the broader civil rights movements; concerns with women is particularly telling, as Baez assumed increasingly public political stances and many women modeled themselves on her image and behavior.<sup>58</sup>

By the 1970s, what remained of the folk movement was a pastiche idea about acoustic guitars and political engagement which was in countercurrent with the new musical strains and avant-garde movements, particularly the one hatching in Andy Warhol’s Factory, in New York, where The Velvet Underground was making its way to be one of the most influential bands of the second half of the century. Patti Smith, in *Just Kids*, describes how in the early 1970s Baez’s image was still bringing on associations with a particular strain of musicians and their behavior:

As we were leaving in the elevator, Fred Hughes, who managed the Factory, addressed me in a condescending voice. “Ohhh, your hair is very Joan Baez. Are you a folksinger?” I don’t know why, as I admired her, but it bugged me. Robert took my hand. “Just ignore him,” he said.

[...]

I looked at myself in the mirror over the sink. I realized that I hadn’t cut my hair any different since I was a teenager. I sat on the floor and spread out the few rock magazines I had. I usually bought them to get any new pictures of Bob Dylan, but it wasn’t Bob I was looking for. I cut out all the pictures I could find of Keith Richards. I studied them for a while and took up the scissors, machete-ing my way out of the folk era. I washed my hair in the hallway bathroom and shook it dry. It was a liberating experience. (Smith 140)

Baez’s long dark hair once stood for the refusal to accept a vain image of women, in which sexual connotations were more relevant than intellectual engagement. In that sense, Patti Smith’s haircut stands for a different type of female-role, in which the opposition is no more between blondes and brunettes, but between longhaired and shorthaired women; as the former opposition, the new style is rebelling against the former’s stereotypical meaning. The haircut, while seeming futile, is the distinction

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<sup>58</sup> Apart from expressing her political opinions publicly, taking advantage of her notoriety, in 1964 she was a pioneer in an anti-war kind of protest which consisted of withholding from the IRS the amount being directed to war costs (if 60% of the national budget was directed at the war’s effort, Baez would only pay 40% of her taxes).

between different types of beliefs: Smith had to cut her hair short to be freed from the folk era and to be able to fit in with different artistic commitments. Smith's haircut is liberating in the sense it is an intellectual move away from certain influences.

Baez's popularity was to play a crucial role in Bob Dylan's ascension to success, as she endorsed him by inviting him along to do the first half of her shows in 1963, enabling him to play for much larger audiences than he was accustomed to; still not the public figure he would soon become, he was the victim of heckling by Baez's audience, something he was compensated for by often singing some songs in Baez's half of the show. One of the most quoted lines about Dylan and Baez's relationship was Fred Neil's description of a conversation between Dylan and Richard Fariña about Baez's opening doors to the music industry:

"Fariña gave Bob this lecture," said Neil. "If you want to be a songwriter, man, you'd better find yourself a singer.' You see, Bob and me, we were both writing, but I knew how to sing. Fariña told him straight, 'Man, what you need to do, man, is hook up with Joan Baez. She is so square, she isn't in this century. She needs you to bring her into the twentieth century, and you need somebody like her to do your songs. She's your ticket, man. All you need to do, man, is start screwing Joan Baez.'" (Hajdu 100)

As noted by Ian Bell, "[...] the idea that Dylan swept all before him in the early 1960s is a nonsense. In October of 1964, Nat Hentoff, writing in *The New Yorker*, would report that the first three albums had 'reached a cumulative sales figure of nearly four hundred thousand.' That was good, not great: by 1962, Baez's first three albums had gone gold" (280). One of the possible outlines for history is the one where Dylan saw an opportunity in a relationship with Baez to boost his own career. Imagining a cold and heartless Dylan perceiving the commercial possibilities of a partnership with Baez is a good version to the many who have tried to dismiss Dylan's importance but, nevertheless, it is an outline hard to accept if one has to assess both singers' creative output: Dylan is, by far, the more artistically oriented of the two and even Baez would easily recognize that.

As Gordon Gano sings in Violent Femmes' "American Music," both Dylan and Baez had American music in their souls and that is, definitely, one of the attractions of their relationship, the notion they represent the perfect image of a certain kind of American music: they were not only good dates for a putative prom, they were also front runners for the title of King and Queen of the prom; Tom Paxton,<sup>59</sup> commenting on Baez and Dylan's performance in the Newport Folk Festival in 1963, would say: "The

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<sup>59</sup> One of the singers from the early folk scene in Greenwich Village.

buzz just kept growing exponentially and it was like a coronation of Bob and Joan. They were King and Queen of the festival” (quoted in Sounes 141).<sup>60</sup> One of the points in the Violent Femmes’ song was that a relationship with music is often tainted by lack of opportunity but Dylan and Baez, on the other hand, had been born in the right era, neither born too soon nor born too late; if Dylan continuously claims, in speech and songs, he was born too late in relation to the kind of music he tries to emulate, Baez’s relation to the American musical tradition is mostly similar to Dylan’s and so, in that sense, they were exactly perfect for each other: they both fed on the same tradition. Their fallout, in the mid-1960s, was then a huge surprise and Dylan’s marriage to Sara Lownds a public disappointment. To make things worse, Dylan disappeared after 1966, leaving Baez alone to survive in a musical scene he had completely shattered by his incursion into rock and roll.

Baez’s decline, along with folk’s popularity, was slow but steady; her image became deteriorated and her music became less and less relevant. So when Dylan reinstated Baez to his stage, for the Rolling Thunder Revue, in 1975, he was reinstating an idea of Baez and not really the artist who was trying to survive commercially in a period her politically-oriented songs no longer fit in; indeed, Baez had not changed in any ways relevant and her constancy might have been, in part, what appealed to Dylan.<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, after the success of the first Rolling Thunder Revue, when the second stretch of shows was being prepared, it was with natural surprise Dylan found, instead of Baez, a short haired woman: “He once told me I’d start selling albums again if I let my hair grow. But I had cut it all off between Rolling Thunders, and when I walked into the rehearsal room in Jacksonville, Florida, Bob said, ‘What the fuck have you done to your hair?’” (Baez 242). Dylan was not the only one feeling a haircut was relevant:

The curtain was prominently in place onstage after the break; from behind it came guitar-strumming sounds, and the curtain slowly rose to reveal Dylan and Joan Baez singing “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” Dylan was wearing his first-half sombrero gear, including a vast and flowing scarf; Baez, dressed in what looked like gigantically flared blue bell bottoms, had her trademark long hair cropped to her shoulders; and so the duo weren’t the same as in 1964, and yet they were, at least aurally—a numinous throwback to an earlier, more earnest time. “Thank you,” Dylan replied to the applause; then he called out, “Bob Dylan and Joan Baez”—announcing himself in the third person, as if we had just seen the return of a beloved bygone act, as if the Bob Dylan doing the talking were not the same

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<sup>60</sup> The coronation, the one possible, at least, would be a famously emotional rendition of the song “We Shall Overcome,” with Baez and Dylan on stage holding hands with Peter, Paul and Mary, Pete Seeger, the Freedom Singers and Theodore Bikel.

<sup>61</sup> “Perhaps Baez sensed an opportunity of her own at a time when, by her confession, she was trying to restore her public profile. Perhaps, just as a decade before, there was a mutual benefit to be had from the adventure” (Bell, *Time Out of Mind* 111).

person who had just performed. He was playing around with his persona again, and hers, and he was mixing up the past with the present. (Wilentz 144)

Wilentz's description of the impossibility of recapturing the past can actually be heard on *The Bootleg Series, vol. 5: Bob Dylan Live 1975*. In two CDs which try to evoke the ambience of the Rolling Thunder Revue, Dylan and Baez sing together on "Blowin' in the Wind," "Mama, You've Been On My Mind," and "I Shall Be Released." One can hear, as Wilentz describes, Dylan trying to mix the present and the past, returning to a "beloved bygone act," but nonetheless evolving; but while Dylan plays around with his voice, trying to insufflate new life into the songs, Baez is consciously trying to hit the right notes as if the perfect reproduction of the song were a necessary condition to bring back the social relevance she always thought herself and Dylan to have. This is particularly evident in "Blowin' in the Wind," where Dylan's voice wanders around the possible vocal inflections of each line and Baez is steadily searching not only to reach the right note but also trying to impose the seriousness she always perceived in the song. For Baez, it is possible to recapture the past, even with the short hair—it is just a matter of reaching the right notes; but for Dylan there is no possible connection to the past, as his personal evolution does not allow him to hear the songs in the same manner as Baez. Mostly they disagree about what a song is: for Baez, a song is a piece of work which always communicates its meaning when done properly (or, in the case of great songs, if not done properly at least done with a certain amount of feeling). For Dylan a song is a structure which can be worked to better fit with the singer's intentions in different moments; sometimes, as with "Blowin' in the Wind," after singing a certain amount of songs and walking a certain number of roads, it just becomes harder and harder to recapture the pathos at the basis of a song.

Baez's reappearance in Dylan's life, just as he returned to touring, prompted an immediate reaction in fans regarding a possible romantic reunion; the fact Dylan's wedding was falling apart only enhanced the rumors and the search for Baez in Dylan's songs was renewed in what is still considered to be Dylan's most personal album, *Blood On the Tracks* (1975).<sup>62</sup> Mostly, people tend to look at *Blood on the Tracks* as the most accomplished of Dylan's works, particularly in terms of its lyrical content. In a description of "Tangled Up in Blue," the version from *Real Live* (1985), Greil Marcus concludes:

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<sup>62</sup> Dylan's incursion in the movie making industry, *Renaldo and Clara* (1978), featuring not only Dylan and Baez but also Sara, was the type of Freudian landscape any psychoanalyst dreams of and another reason to believe Baez is a presence in the songs from this period.

On the *Real Live* version of “Tangled Up in Blue,” Dylan went through the verses as if he knew both what they said and what they didn’t say, and so he changed words all over the place. He played with the song, laughed with it, brought it to life, no doubt inventing as he sang. He reminded me that in 1965, when he would stand-alone on a stage and sing the then-unreleased “Desolation Row,” people would laugh out loud, and he would grin. His music wasn’t a burden his audience was expected to shoulder; it was an adventure its audience was free to join, and free to reject. It wasn’t about Bob Dylan; only fools wondered if this or that song was about Joan Baez. (Marcus, *Writings* 123)

Under this description, the actual idea songs are about something is questioned; for Marcus, songs are a matter of musical and lyrical innovation and imagining the songs are about Dylan seems beside the point. Other critics, nevertheless, disagree; Bell, for instance, describes Dylan’s writing on *Blood on the Tracks* by stating it was a rediscovery of a more focused way of writing, reminiscent of a precision one might only find in *John Wesley Harding*:

It’s a mode that reappears time and again among poets as they rebel against ornament and excess. It springs from the feeling that sometimes only certain words are right, that dazzling, playful “surreal” lines are beside the point when life gets serious. It’s a matter of concentration, in every sense, a kind of artistic mood swing. Only with *Blood on the Tracks* would Dylan rediscover this kind of deep focus. (Bell 502-3)

But Bell’s and Marcus’ approaches are, I believe, both wrong: *Blood on the Tracks* is neither about adventurous innovation nor about lyrical precision; on the contrary, it is about emotional generality. What Dylan is doing in that album is trying to translate into songs several feelings that, it is true, come from his real life, but that are constantly changing, making him shift the lyrical content of the songs in order to fit those changes. The first version of “If You See Her, Say Hello,” recorded in the famous New York sessions,<sup>63</sup> is the most obvious example of how such changes affect the content of a song; the first version has the lines: “If you’re making love to her, kiss her for the kid / Who always has respected her for doing what she did,” while the album version, recorded in Minneapolis, was changed for the softer version: “If you get close to her, kiss her once for me / I always have respected her for doing what she did and gettin’ free.” Dylan’s resentment towards the subject of the song, his soon to be ex-wife, is clearly reevaluated in the second version, in which the line of the final version is “an antiseptic replacement for the displaced intimacy” (Heylin, *Still On the Road* 41) of the original line. What is most

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<sup>63</sup> The New York Sessions of *Blood on the Tracks* were a famous bootleg with wide circulation, comprising the first attempt to record the album, before the process was eventually transferred to Minneapolis, where the album was finished. According to Bell, it was Dylan’s brother who suggested a revision of the New York Sessions, sensing it “lacked a necessary commercial edge” Bell, *Time Out of Mind* 42). Some songs from the New York Sessions were officially released in *Bootleg Series Vols. 1-3* in 1991.

remarkable is that these reevaluations do not originate a new song and it is the old songs which are changed, as Kinney points out about the “Tangled Up in Blue” versions from the born-again Christian period: “He started wearing the cross onstage, and close listeners noticed a new twist when he sang ‘Tangled Up in Blue’ from *Blood On the Tracks*. On the record, he goes home with a stripper and she reads to him from a book of Italian poetry. Toward the end of 1978, the stripper and the singer are reading from the Holy Bible” (99).

Most songs from *Blood on the Tracks* were kept in the concerts’ set lists throughout the following years, constantly being revised and reworked, not only musically but also lyrically; in 1985, Dylan would comment on the several reworkings of “Tangled Up in Blue”:

There’s a version [of “Tangled Up in Blue] we used to do on stage with just electric guitar and a saxophone—keeping the same lyrics, thinking that maybe if I did that to it, it would bring it out in an emotional way. But it didn’t hold up very well that way. So I changed the lyrics, to bring it up to date. But I didn’t change it ’cause I was singing it one night and thought, “Oh, I’m bored with the old words.” The old ones were never quite filled in. I rewrote it in a hotel room somewhere. I think it was in Amsterdam... when I sang it the next night I knew it was right. (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 566)

Songs can be “brought up to date” by reworking their musical structure or by reworking their lyrical contents; in some cases, maybe both aspects need reworking in order to bring out the particular feeling aimed at. What the many reworkings of songs from this particular album announce is a way of looking at songs as structures to particular feelings which can be worked around within some limits in order to clarify their original pathos or inflect new connotations into that pathos. Dylan is in no way near Baez’s position towards what a song is; describing her recording of an album of Dylan’s songs, *Any Day Now* (1968), she explains: “I loved recording in Nashville, and because of the richness and variety of Bob’s music, it was one of the easiest albums I’ve ever recorded. I just spread his sheet music all over the floor of the studio, shut my eyes and pointed, and sang whichever song came up” (Baez 166). How could the approach of each singer be any more different than this? So, when the Violent Femmes sing about American music and the need to be understood, one should not dismiss the idea understanding one another cannot be done merely by reference to one’s particular tastes; enjoying the same kind of music is not condition enough for understanding someone else. Maybe this was the main reason why Dylan and Baez’s relationship could not work: they have absolutely contrasting notions of what a song is. Dylan’s work, throughout his many decades as an



artist, seems to prove songs are not just objects able to be piled up together in any order, but are instead pieces of one's life, ready to reflect who one is within certain limits.

Back in 1966, Dylan would say: "Performers are people who perform for other people. Unlike actors, I know what I'm saying. It's very simple in my mind. It doesn't matter what kind of reaction the whole thing gets. What happens on the stage is straight. It doesn't expect any rewards or fines from any kind of outside agitators. It's ultrasimple and would exist whether anybody was looking or not" (Hajdu 280-1). Remembering a Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Ion, Dylan is closer to the "Heracleian stone" than Baez ever was. Baez is much closer to the rhapsodes' circle and has, thus, more resemblances to Ion than to Homer. Her eagerness and happiness to make others cry is closely connected, in that sense, with Ion's remarks about his own sustenance being dependent on the public's reactions: making others cry is a rhapsode's doing. Baez's similarities with Ion are actually uncanny: as with Ion, Baez follows through on her idea that songs have given her the ability to be a politician (Ion had learnt to be a general from reading Homer), for instance, and, as with Ion, she believes it worthier to be divine—in her own words, she always enjoyed the role of the untouchable madonna. In that sense, as Ion is sometimes possessed by Homer so Baez is occasionally possessed by Dylan. On the other hand, "Dylan has always felt he is a channel for divine inspiration, and has said that the words stream through him" (Sounes 2), putting him closer to Homer and divine seers (not coincidentally, probably, he has often been called a prophet<sup>64</sup>); but even when dressed "in fine clothes" as actors and rhapsodes, as he was in the Rolling Thunder Revue, Dylan is always trying to extricate the interpreters from his work (what happens on stage is "straight" and does not require or need explanation). Dylan's art consists in always trying to say things with songs (whether songs are old or new, original or traditional); while he might fail often, sometimes things do come across and in those moments one could claim, along with Socrates, that poets are indeed possessed.

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<sup>64</sup> "Bob was surprisingly humble in the [1962 *Sing Out!*] interview when it came to talking about the new songs he was creating. "The songs are there. They exist all by themselves just waiting for someone to write them down. I just put them down on paper," he said. "If I don't do it, somebody else would." This was not false modesty for the purposes of publication. It was the way he talked in private with friends, and it remained his philosophy throughout his career, an unchanging belief that was in many ways a kind of faith. He clearly felt that songs came to him from some other place and, over the years, he would come to believe that the songs were actually given to him by god. "He felt he wasn't writing songs, he was just writing them down," says Tom Paxton. "They were here to be captured" (Sounes 127).

## Blind Willie McTell

It is noteworthy how people, when discussing Bob Dylan's career, tend to make a special case in mentioning the album they make out as the best Dylan, as if choosing that album were a ritual for saying in which side of the critical trenches one lies in; particular alliance towards an album gives way to certain assumptions about ideas on the author's career and evolution, towards the facing of possible mistakes and moments of geniality—the favorite album tells much about the nature of our relation to the author's work. Noteworthy is the disparity of favorite albums people have; while *Blonde on Blonde* is always singled out as probably the best Dylan, many appoint others as favorites, from *John Wesley Harding* to *Time Out of Mind* (1997), from *Highway 61 Revisited* to *Blood on the Tracks*. The main difficulty in dealing with Dylan is usually to delineate a coherent picture of someone who has released so many different types of albums, both in what concerns musical diversity as well as quality. The first inclination people who talk about Dylan have (helped, no doubt, by the artist himself) is to make reference to concepts about masks or, for those more inclined to mysticism, to different selves, numerous Dylans who surface in different moments and produce distinctive kinds of music; while critics have delved into this path for several decades, the last strike to induce such behavior was Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There* (2007), a film based on Dylan's life where different actors portray Dylan in different moments of his life. In this vein, it is not uncommon to speak of Dylan the protest singer, Dylan the beat poet, Dylan the new-born Christian, and so on. Many believe it is impossible to have a coherent picture of Dylan's career, and, by inference, of Dylan himself, without imagining he was different people throughout his life; and many believe this to be so since there is a strong relation between the musical production and the biography, implying the music is constantly reflecting a different person. This is not the usual rambling about the autobiographical details coming up in the lyrics about relationships gone wrong, but is connected with a more general relation between who one is and what one does. In Dylan, this is relatively obvious as one moves throughout the work and understands the author's different anxieties are always reflected in his music. This naturally opens up the also usual conversations about the level of honesty involved in Dylan's work and must be seen as a blow to those who constantly attack Dylan for his lack of honesty: if his music always reflects his anxieties, how can that be dishonesty? Naturally, the problem lies in the notion coherence should cause

stability throughout life but that is just illogical: should we believe coherence to be more relevant than evolution? Should we believe it is normal never to change our mind about things happening in our lives? If what one does is relevant to one's assessment of who one is, then it is absolutely necessary for one's personal changes to come up reflected in what one does; and while we may find this is particularly so in art related circles, we must not neglect it happens with every single human being and the ways we, as human beings, relate to one another and to our environment.

I believe it is possible to find coherence in Dylan by understanding he has one single concern moving throughout his work: belonging to the list of names constituting what we can generally describe as American traditional music. The different types of answers to that concern originate different kinds of music and different reactions to the music industry which people tend to treat in different ways, as if different selves emerged every time Dylan changed the tempo of a song. Dylan's main concern has always been, whether things are on track or whether they go astray, as they so often do in Dylan's career, his inclusion in the pantheon of American traditional music, a pantheon created by the peculiar development of American ethnomusicology. While in Britain (and Europe) tradition consisted in a list of songs and their variants, in the United States one had a list of singers' names; instead of different variants to a song, one has different versions of that song; mainly, instead of a handful of singers singing a list of songs, one has a list of singers singing a handful of songs which, curiously enough, all sound different. Professor Bertrand Bronson, quoted by Clinton Heylin, says: "The dominant impression conveyed by a good folk song sung in the best traditional style is... one of genuinely classic impersonality" (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 70); American folk was always dominated by the strong personal impression each performer introduced in his or her songs, hence turning the list of names constituting American traditional music into something special, highly personal—the personality introduced by such singers made them into more than just *song-carriers*, in Ewan MacColl's description, although, in a sense, they also performed that function. Since there was such a high-level of personal features added into these songs, American traditional music cannot be confined to just folk, encompassing many different styles, from blues to jazz, from ragtime to country. As seen previously, the songs were blended with the personal story of the singer; the main consequence of this amalgamation is that the singers' usually little-known life ends up muddled with the lives of European warriors and Scottish lords described by the secular songs which were the basis of their repertoire.

Dylan's main purpose was always to be allowed in that list of names and, if possible, to have songs tell his story in the same manner as they told the story of these singers, through a blending between who he is and what he sings. Nevertheless, since his early years as a singer in New York, Dylan's career has always been dealt with in various peculiar ways, as if the public aspect of that career were constantly standing as an obstacle to understanding his endeavor. Assessment of Dylan depends, naturally, on understanding many crucial aspects of his career and to risk descriptions of why some musical shifts have been made and the implications they had on the author's output. Looking back on his career, one can identify two major prolific periods: one, already alluded to, between 1964 and 1966, with *Bringing it All Back Home*, *Highway 61 Revisited*, and *Blonde on Blonde*; another between 1979-1981, with *Slow Train Coming*, *Saved*, and *Shot of Love*. Coincidentally, these two periods were also the moments Dylan most moved away from his goal and, it is my claim, his reaction to those periods was to return to his roots and to the influences he believes most relevant for his career: the musical and lyrical exuberance of *Blonde on Blonde* was followed by the formal and lyrical constrictions of *John Wesley Harding*; in the 1980s, after another creative period, Dylan released *Infidels* (1983), which seems a different type of reaction, but he also recorded "Blind Willie McTell," a song which might represent a great deal in Dylan's career and one I want to give close attention.

In 1966, Dylan had a motorcycle accident and abandoned live performances until 1974, save for some sporadic appearances.<sup>65</sup> The contradictions in Dylan's descriptions of the accident, as well as the different accounts of people who actually saw him in the weeks after it, led to several explanations about what really had taken place, some refusing to accept an accident had actually happened (it has also been suggested it was an excuse to get out of another tour his agent, Albert Grossman, had already scheduled). In any case, accident or not, Dylan took a step back from his public life and settled in Woodstock with his wife and their children. The literary inflection that originated *Blonde on Blonde* moved Dylan away from the folk names he would like to be associated with and his reaction was to retreat back into familiar ground by conceiving an album obviously indebted to those influences: *John Wesley Harding*. The answer to the excesses of *Blonde on Blonde* came not only by a physical retreat but also by an aesthetic retreat; not only did Dylan choose to refrain from the lyrical freedom associated with the beat poets, he also relinquished the formal freedom he had attained by probing into more blues-oriented

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<sup>65</sup> Among the few public performances during this period is the tribute concert to Woody Guthrie, the guest appearance on the Johnny Cash TV show and a concert where he was guest to The Band.

structures. Many consider *John Wesley Harding* Dylan's masterpiece and even for those who have another album as their favorite, this one still holds a special aura. Dylan, quoted by Heylin, mentions the different method of work he used for the album: "There's only two songs on the album which came at the same time as the music. The rest of the songs were written out on paper, and I found the tunes for them later. I didn't do it before, and I haven't done it since. That might account for the specialness of that album" (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 287). While the lyrical contents still explore literary references, with Tom Paine or St. Augustine showing up as characters, the songs exist within the realm of American traditional music, with hobos and freight trains making up the landscape of what one easily conceives as an American setting; beyond the lyrical constraints, Dylan imposes structures more common to folk music, refraining from the freedom other styles of music could have allowed.<sup>66</sup>

Ian Bell, in a two volumes biography trying to give order to all of the information available on the singer, sees a pattern of behavior in Dylan's career and life which reinforces the connection between biography and artistic output: "The pattern would be echoed in Dylan's life and career: first the embrace of the new, then the retreat into older traditions. The cycle repeats and repeats" (*Once Upon a Time* 117). Probably contemplating the same pattern, Sean Wilentz, in *Bob Dylan in America*, singles out "Blind Willie McTell" as a special moment in Bob Dylan's career. Following his prolific creative period of 1979-81, "Blind Willie McTell" was recorded during the sessions for the album *Infidels*, although it ended up being cut off from the album's line up and only released in 1991, in *Bootleg Series Vol. 1-3*. While most critics identify *Ob Mercy* (1989) with the beginning of what is known as Dylan's late period, when his songwriting drifted back to a strongly linked relationship with traditional American music, Wilentz believes "Blind Willie McTell" already shows all the traits of that late period, demonstrating Dylan was already contemplating a retreat to more familiar ground when recording *Infidels*. In several interviews, but mostly in *Chronicles*, Dylan has tried to single out *Ob Mercy* as the crucial moment where things started anew; he describes his association with producer Daniel Lanois, for *Ob Mercy*, not only as an artistic development but also, first and foremost, as a move away from a set of bad choices he had made in previous years.

Dylan's artistic fading during the 1980s might, in fact, have been a consequence of his wrong move towards a more commercially appealing type of music; as Heylin put

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<sup>66</sup> At the same time, or roughly about the same time, Dylan was recording the famous *Basement Tapes* with The Band, a set of recordings Greil Marcus, in *Invisible Republic*, considers as archetypal and relevant as Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

it, “*Infidels* was to be the final album from Dylan’s second great songwriting era (1974-83), a renaissance that was to end as it began, with the scrapping of a true representation of his songwriting self in favor of a counterfeit version” (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 557). The period prior to the recording of *Oh Mercy* was very harsh for Dylan, so harsh he even considered abandoning his career. Much as when Johnny Cash admitted the 1980s were a dark period in his career, Dylan felt he had gone through a similar path and thought he had reached his lowest point: “In reality I was just above a club act. Could hardly fill small theaters” (Dylan 155). In *Chronicles*, Dylan describes how, by watching an old jazz musician perform, he remembered an old vocal technique and assumed he could recover it for the shows he had scheduled for the next months; but suddenly, when things seemed to be going better, the technique failed him during a show:

Then suddenly, one night in Locarno, Switzerland, at the Piazza Grande Locarno, it all fell apart. For an instant I fell into a black hole. The stage was outdoors and the wind was blowing gales, the kind of night that can blow everything away. I opened my mouth to sing and the air tightened up—vocal presence was extinguished and nothing came out. The techniques weren’t working. I couldn’t believe it. I thought I had it down so well, yet it was just another trick. There’s no pleasure in getting caught in a situation like this. You can get a panic attack. You’re in front of thirty thousand people and they’re staring at you and nothing is coming out. Things can really get stupid. Figuring I had nothing to lose and not needing to take any precautions, I conjured up some different type of mechanism to jump-start the other techniques that weren’t working. I just did it automatically out of thin air, cast my own spell to drive out the devil. Instantly, it was like a thoroughbred had charged through the gates. Everything came back, and it came back in multidimension. Even I was surprised. It left me kind of shaky. Immediately, I was flying high. This new thing had taken place right in front of everybody’s eyes. A difference in energy might have been perceived, but that was about all. Nobody would have noticed that a metamorphosis had taken place. Now the energy was coming from a hundred different angles, completely unpredictable ones. I had a new faculty and it seemed to surpass all the other human requirements. If I ever wanted a different purpose, I had one. It was like I’d become a new performer, an unknown one in the true sense of the word. In more than thirty years of performing, I had never seen this place before, never been here. If I didn’t exist, someone would have to have invented me. (Dylan 152-3)

The metamorphosis Dylan alludes to is relevant in the sense he wants to dismiss his lesser performances, and lesser works, as technically driven instead of being emotionally motivated: it is a question of honesty in the sense Dylan believes no matter what he is doing, writing or performing, there must be an emotional relation to it (or else he is just an actor). The idea of becoming a “new performer” assumes relevance for Dylan’s late period, for it implies an inflection, in this moment, in this epiphany, which will allow for the techniques to be used as an extension of the performer; the contradiction in this description lies in the fact everything that “came back” led Dylan to a place where he had never “been in more than thirty years of performing.” Again, as many times in the past, Dylan is trying to control the public absorption of his life by forcing this moment as crucial for his biography.

Heylin quotes Dylan to explain there being moments when his music loses connection with its roots and at those moments Dylan feels uncomfortable: “My influences have not changed—and any time they have done, the music goes off to a wrong place. That’s why I recorded two LP’s of old songs, so I could personally get back to the music that’s true for me” (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 670). With this in mind, Heylin places the beginning of the late Dylan a few years after *Ob Mercy*, upon the release of two albums of traditional songs (*Good as I Been to You*, 1992, and *World Gone Wrong*, 1993). This return to his roots in the 1990s (or late 1980s, according to some) is, then, part of the reaction to a period where music drifted away from his influences not only during his born-again Christian period but also due to his dealings with commercial rock. My argument, following Wilentz’s idea about “Blind Willie McTell,” is the rock period was indeed a mistake and Dylan’s normal reaction to the intense creativity of the born-again Christian period would already entice a return to more traditional structures. *Infidels* did well commercially, running on the popularity hard and heavy rock had gathered in previous years, much as The Kinks’ American recognition had come, in the late 1970s, by adapting their sound to what sold.<sup>67</sup> But punk had demeaned these old bands aesthetically irrelevant, and their revival in the 1980s was a forgetful derivation from the relevant musical currents undergoing on the outskirts of the popularity charts. Heylin, describing Dylan’s appearance in the TV show *Late Night with David Letterman* on March 22, 1984, sided by younger musicians who had in the previous years been related to the punk movement, says that performance made a stronger impact than any of his associations with older bands.<sup>68</sup> One could claim Dylan’s reaction to an intense period of creativity took a lot longer than it had taken in the 1960s, but if Wilentz is correct, as I believe he is, Dylan’s reaction was immediate: “Blind Willie McTell” was such a reaction. The need to return to his roots is prior to any epiphany and one can dismiss such descriptions, as we can dismiss much of what Dylan says, as another attempt to write his story in a certain way which he perceives as most fitting the popularized romantic notion he holds of the folk names he seeks to emulate.

In the midst of the convulsions in Dylan’s career, “Blind Willie McTell” appears, indeed, as a miracle many have devoted their attention to, claiming this song to be one of Dylan’s highest moments; Michael Gray, for instance, dedicates a chapter to it in his *Song*

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<sup>67</sup> Ray Davies, in *Americana*, while assessing, for instance, *Low Budget* (1979), assumes the change in the band’s sound towards heavier sonorities was a major contribute to increase their popularity with American crowds.

<sup>68</sup> The musicians in that performance were J. J. Holiday on guitar, Tony Marisco on bass and Charlie Quintana on drums.

*and Dance Man III.*<sup>69</sup> Part of that chapter is devoted to explaining how “St. James Hotel” is a reference to the song “St. James Infirmary,” a very popular traditional song which has its origins in an older European song, “The Unfortunate Rake.”<sup>70</sup> Gray’s efforts to trace down the several possible versions lines could have been borrowed from is noteworthy, but the popularity of “St. James Infirmary” makes it probably unnecessary: certain phrases, as certain places, become so ingrained in popular culture it is hard to mention them without them being a reference. It would be a fairly naive assumption to presume Dylan, with his vast knowledge of American traditional music, chooses to name this hotel without assuming its name will bear similarities with such famous song; this is more evident still as one must acknowledge the images of the song as recognizable references to images portrayed in hundreds of traditional American songs. In “Blind Willie McTell,” the reference becomes even more obvious as the song is entitled after someone who performed such songs (according to Gray, McTell’s “Dying Crapshoot Blues” is, by way of “St. James Infirmary,” a personalized version of “The Unfortunate Rake”).

Refuting Gray’s theory on the song, Heylin goes on to put forward the song is not actually about Blind Willie McTell; picking up on a description Dylan made of McTell in 1991, where he describes McTell as “probably the Van Gogh of the country blues,” “a very smooth operating blues man” with a vocal style fitting “right with that lonesome sound,” Heylin goes on to suggest the choice of McTell was a technical device, since his name lends itself easier to rhymes, and proposing the bluesman Dylan is really thinking about is Blind Willie Johnson, one of the names figured in Harry Smith’s anthology and that would fit, apparently, the description and tone of this song (Heylin, *Still On the Road* 305-12). Heylin points out Johnson’s career is much easier to fit in the simile with Van Gogh than that of McTell, a singer who enjoyed some periods of success as a musician. As Wilentz points out about McTell’s career, “it is misleading, in fact, to think of McTell narrowly as a blues musician” (193), a statement which meets Heylin’s assumption the song is not, in fact, about McTell; but instead of locating a new possible target, Wilentz lets it hang in the air that the song is not about anyone in particular and it does not have to be: McTell is a surrogate for a tradition with an easy name to rhyme with. In both cases, Heylin’s and Wilentz’s, there seems to be a need to account for what

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<sup>69</sup> Gray is also the author of *Hand Me My Travelin’ Shoes: In Search of Blind Willie McTell*, a biography of the singer.

<sup>70</sup> Gray explains that the first published record of the song dates from 1909, while its first written form dates from 1848; Gray adds that the 1848 version states the person who wrote it down learned the song in Dublin, in 1790 (Gray 530).



Alex Ross, speaking about *Time Out of Mind*, identifies as one major theme in Dylan's late period: "These are songs about the loneliness of listening: you could add to them 'Blind Willie McTell,' which was recorded in 1983 and appeared in the *Bootleg* boxed set as a kind of fanfare to *Time Out of Mind*" (285).

Wilentz's move to introduce some kind of symbolic value to McTell goes, nonetheless, against his attempts at reading the song, where his positions always dwell on the search of actual references. For instance, instead of going along with most readings of the song as to the reference to "St. James Infirmary," Wilentz favors believing Dylan is actually in a real hotel of that name (even pointing out some likely candidates); in the same vein, Wilentz believes Jerusalem might actually be the name of a town in the United States, referring to possible towns bearing the name in the South, an important part of his reading.<sup>71</sup> Just as Heylin was trying to demystify the readings of the songs, so to does Wilentz attempt to devalue common readings and highly literary descriptions of Dylan's songs as great symbolic movements towards a reading of America, or as great emotional representations of humanity; while these type of hyperbolic readings do not confine themselves to Dylan and abound in literature, for some reason Dylan's music seems prone to these types of infatuation. In any case, while one could easily relate to these critics' fight against those types of hyperbolic readings, this song is the wrong battlefield to wage such a war. One cannot dismiss the symbolic factor of the song as Dylan is actually forcing it from the first line:

Seen the arrow on the doorpost  
Saying, "This land is condemned  
All the way from New Orleans  
To Jerusalem"  
I traveled through East Texas  
Where many martyrs fell  
And I know no one can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

Well, I heard that hoot owl singing  
As they were taking down the tents  
The stars above the barren trees  
Were his only audience  
Them charcoal gypsy maidens  
Can strut their feathers well  
But nobody can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

See them big plantations burning  
Hear the cracking of the whips

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<sup>71</sup> Noting that in the live versions Dylan sings "New Jerusalem" instead of just "Jerusalem," Wilentz advances the possibility that the town might be a reference to the town that would rise in Missouri, founded by the prophet Joseph Smith (Wilentz 199).

Smell that sweet magnolia blooming  
See the ghosts of slavery ships  
I can hear them tribes a-moaning  
Hear that undertaker's bell  
Nobody can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

There's a woman by the river  
With some fine young handsome man  
He's dressed up like a squire  
Bootlegged whiskey in his hand  
There's a chain gang on the highway  
I can hear them rebels yell  
And I know no one can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

Well, God is in His heaven  
And we all want what's His  
But power and greed and corruptible seed  
Seem to be all that there is  
I'm gazing out the window  
Of the St. James Hotel  
And I know no one can sing the blues  
Like Blind Willie McTell

Ross's idea that "Blind Willie McTell" announces *Time Out of Mind* seems fair, if one understands Dylan's late period is highly dependent on tradition:

Everything on *Time Out of Mind* goes under one dreamy, archaic mood. The album manages to skip the twentieth century: trains discourage gambling, people ride in buggies, there's no air-conditioning ("It's too hot to sleep"), church bells ring, "gay" means "happy," the time of day is measured by the sun, lamps apparently run on gas (and are turned "down low"), and, most of the time, the singer is walking. (Ross 285)

But, as Greil Marcus puts it, "Bob Dylan has been many things over the years, but he's never been a very good purist" (Marcus, *Writings* 94). This being so, one should always be ready to face Dylan's corruptions of his sources. As noted before, the reference to "St. James Infirmary," through the naming of the hotel, seems crucial; its relevance is underlined since it is at that moment that an inflection in the verb happens which should make one wonder: the only occurrence of the present continuous ("I'm gazing out"). What this verbal inflection implies is Dylan is actually within this hotel, gazing out through the window at a series of images—the images described in the previous stanzas. In "Blind Willie McTell," where the imagery of old songs is so blatantly summoned, some of those images would naturally have Dylan's inflection; while there are several moments in which stock imagery from old songs appears, as when the owl sings and its only audience is the "the stars above the barren trees" (and the singer), or the smell of the magnolias blooming, or the chain gang on the highway, there are moments a certain

dysfunction in those images is introduced. The most telling reference to old songs is actually in the beginning of the fourth stanza, where a woman stands by the river; while some wonder who that woman might be, what is striking is the man standing with that woman dressed up “like a squire,” but holding bootlegged whisky in his hand: what would be a reasonable explanation for such an attire? I believe this man dressed as a squire is a side effect of old songs being adapted when they migrated from Europe to the New World, just as “The Unfortunate Rake” mutated into “St. James Infirmary” (or into “Dying Crapshooter’s Blues”). All other images are, mostly, stock images used by traditional songs: the echoes of slavery, the strong influence of southern landscapes, the minstrel shows summoned up by the idea of the carnival tents and the “charcoal maidens” strutting their feathers in the second stanza. If we add the European influence set by the reference to the man dressed as a squire, one cannot turn away from the idea that this song is about other songs.

What is amazing about this song is the fact Dylan literally wants to get inside the tradition he is referring to: not only is he inside the St. James Hotel in the last stanza gazing through a window at all these images he just described, it is also true, and one should not forget it, the song began with a sign on a doorpost—should we not suppose he has entered through that door? It cannot be a coincidence that that first stanza, where one is presented with a door, is underlined semantically by ambiguities: the mark on the doorpost recalls the sheep’s blood signs on the doorposts of Jewish houses, while the arrow might redirect one to Native Americans; also the ambiguity of the word “martyrs” associated with East Texas, when one would expect martyrs to fall in a land closer to Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup> Considering all these questions, and noting how the mere geographical references, “from New Orleans to Jerusalem,” are peculiar, one must conclude Wilentz is wrong in assuming the reference to Jerusalem might be to a place within the United States, for what Dylan is doing is stretching the geographical boundaries of the American tradition so that those boundaries can accommodate him and his Jewish background—he is literally describing a door he can walk in through and end up gazing at all this imagery from within. Heylin is also wrong in assuming the song is about anyone else but McTell, for if it is true McTell had a fairly comfortable life, it is only fitting he is chosen for this refrain, for the problem Dylan is trying to extricate from his life is exactly the notion one has to live certain events in order to sing about them—if no one can sing the

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<sup>72</sup> One can still call attention to the ambiguity, a few stanzas further, of the “a-moaning” tribes, which refers to the African tribes the slaves were taken from, but also plays with the ambiguity between the Native American tribes and the twelve Israeli tribes.

blues as McTell, and if he did not have the life of suffering one usually attributes to blues singers (or folk singers), then Dylan has a chance of belonging to that list of bluesmen: he just needs to stretch the boundaries of tradition to accommodate a Jewish man (not only a Jewish man, but a *new* Jewish man after his conversion to Christianity and his retreat from that conversion). If one remembers all the lies he told about his life when he arrived in New York, back in the early 1960s, one can understand those lies were, more than bragging, another way to fit himself into the tradition; thirty years later he understands one does not need to live through all one sings. By understanding this, he also accepts one's life will be remembered through the songs and if that will be the case, one might as well place oneself inside those songs.

In 1997, in an interview with Jon Pareles, for *The New York Times*, speaking about *Time Out of Mind*, Dylan would say:

Those old songs are my lexicon and prayer book. All my beliefs come out of those old songs, literally, anything from "Let Me Rest on that Peaceful Mountain" to "Keep on the Sunny Side." You can find all my philosophy in those old songs. I believe in a God of time and space, but if people ask me about that, my impulse is to point them back toward those songs. I believe in Hank Williams singing "I Saw the Light." I've seen the light, too. (Cott 396)

In the aftermath of his Christian conversion, in an album which would bear the title *Infidels*, Dylan creates a song about "power," "greed," and "corruptible seed" being all there is left; Wilentz notes that Dylan's use of "corruptible seed" is a reference I Peter 1:23: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (201). What this religious reference seems to imply, in line with Dylan's words to Pareles, is that he is taking up a new religion: traditional American music. To belong to that religion, if one takes into account the imagery summoned by Dylan in this song, all the beauty he gazes at from his window is somehow tainted by sin (just as the sweet magnolia blooming is tainted by the crack of the whips, or the ghost of slavery, for instance). Choosing religious conversion (incorruptible seed) closes the door to that type of images and, by extension, diminishes the artistic possibilities of creating songs (one senses the retreat from his religious conversion had more to do with a lack of themes to sing about than with any religious disillusion); to be born again out of incorruptible seed is an impossibility because one is actually born into a sinful humanity. The only conversion left for Dylan is musical conversion, where those images he sings of become his memories and, since they entice the corruptible seed, will eventually condemn him. The nature of this condemnation is not merely metaphorical, as the imperative verbs of the third stanza seem to call

attention to the fact songs have a real existence which can sum up the actual senses: “hear,” “see,” “smell.” Distancing himself from a period of his life when he sang about the possibility of salvation, Dylan wryly creates a song about immersing himself into a place of inevitable condemnation where his only comfort seems to be the voice of Blind Willie McTell; that voice is likewise condemned since it inhabits the same place, it sees (and sings) the same kind of imagery Dylan sees from his hotel window. Songs are a condemned place because they are a reflection of life, and we are condemned from the moment we are born into such a sinful place as the one we live in. According to the song, our solace lies in McTell’s voice or, as Dylan expects us to understand, in similar voices. By broadening the geographical boundaries of this landscape to accommodate him—the “New Jerusalem” is referential to Dylan —, and by introducing himself within that landscape, Dylan expects that, in the end, his name might be among those remaining to comfort us.

## Season of the Unplugged

The relation between art and commerce has been peculiar all the way through the twentieth century, with the implication usually sustaining that a cultural industry, established in a post-industrialist *milieu*, is responsible for lesser art. Distinctions between commercial and fine art are interspersed with older notions of high and low art, in the expectation these might clarify the different ways art is absorbed publicly. The problem has been particularly striking throughout the twentieth century in relation to highly accepted music, specifically with the commercialization of records and the dissemination of radio; as time went on, the reference to “popular tunes” shifted to the less pleasant “pop songs,” denoting objects clearly inferior in quality, at least in relation to other types of songs. One could claim such distinctions were already held regarding sheet music and the inclusion of folk songs into opera, for instance, but the commercialization of music in the twentieth century broadened the discussion, since the proliferation of the recording industry sanctioned the promotion of untrained singers. It is hard to understand what makes certain songs popular, and that might be one of the reasons so many frown upon music which is highly accepted: some feel afraid the enthusiasm might be nothing more than a result of publicity stunts promoting lesser art; nevertheless, in most cases, the popularity of certain songs contaminates the way musicians write and perform new songs and so the actual consequences of what is thought of as lesser art are never really measurable.

Elijah Wald, describing the life of Robert Johnson, explains how commercial music held an important part in artistic achievements for each musician, claiming what is at stake in any kind of art, particularly recorded music, is not just a question of virtuosity. The contention is that what is usually taken as complex and intricate pieces of art might be, and usually are, the consequence of a series of production constraints. Wald notes, for instance, the repertoires of musicians from the first decades of the twentieth century often included many of the most popular songs (pop songs), which were often demanded by audiences, and musicians were expected to be able to change from several styles in each set to accommodate audience’s demands; musicians were required to be technically competent in different styles of music, which naturally influenced their own original production. Among other constraints, Wald mentions, for instance, the length of songs, often something attributed to commercial pressure but mostly shaped by the need

to fit songs on an album's side; Wald describes how many of Johnson's recordings were shaped by sudden changes in the expected structure of songs due to this need to fit them inside the vinyl disc. David Byrne, in *How Music Works*, holds a similar position when he supports the notion music evolved from performance's constraints such as venues' layouts, technical restrictions or the music's function (if it was ritualistic, or played for dancing purposes, for example); these are all relevant features in musical evolution and commercial circumstances are just another feature which sometimes is factored into musical production.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, MTV raised the stakes for those who have looked on commercially-accepted art as lesser art by promoting, in different periods, assorted types of music. In the early 1990s, for instance, MTV was held responsible for the rise of a small number of American bands to world recognition. Defined as the Northwestern sound, "grunge" was led by the success of Nirvana's *Nevermind* (1991), which, some argue, was a direct result of MTV's overexposure of the video of "Smells Like Teen Spirit"; the accusation might have been directed at any radio in prior years, or to any newspaper publicity in years even prior to those, and the amount of criticism directed at the TV channel might be, in some cases, excessive. Be that as it may, grunge took over as the most prominent type of music in the early 1990s, highly supported by MTV, becoming so influential as to create a counter-movement in Britain based on the notion American music's popularity was destroying British identity. Alex Ross, writing for the *New Yorker* in the aftermath of Kurt Cobain's suicide, assessed Nirvana's climb to success and its relation to MTV's commercial strategy:

MTV, the video clubhouse that brought the Nirvanamania to fever pitch, identified the band with a problematic category called "alternative." Alternative culture proposes that the establishment is reprehensible but that our substitute establishment can coexist with it, on the same commercial playing field. It differs from sixties notions of counterculture insofar as no one took it seriously even at the beginning; it sold out as a matter of principle. MTV seized on the "alternative" label as a way of laterally diversifying its offerings, much as soft-drink companies seek to invent new flavors. (Ross 222)

No one actually took the category serious in the sense it was not based on the concerns of a group of musicians, but rather was imposed by the media pressure exerted upon some bands; the songs sold as "alternative" were not politically aimed, as protest songs seemed to be, or politically motivated, as an important part of punk appeared to be, or even socially concerned, as many would like to believe a big part of Morrissey's music was, for instance. But while Ross is correct in assessing the label "alternative," there is an aspect of the rise of Nirvana, and of grunge as a national movement, which had

implications for a whole generation not only of musicians but mainly of audiences, which should not be dismissed under considerations about how things came to be. As the band's quality soon took away the control MTV might have held over the band's labeling, the music became much more relevant than any possible message or political *innuendos* by being ingrained as a way of thinking and positioning oneself within society.

Nirvana's success was based on Kurt Cobain's personality as well as on his songs about inadequacy and self-loathing. Publicly exposed to a degree MTV magnified by the tenths, Cobain's life became a national issue: "His adamantly personal songs became exhibits in the nation's ongoing symposium on generational identity—a fruitless project blending the principles of sociology and astrology" (Ross 222). Most grunge songs were about the inability to fit in within an idea of "normality" and about ethereal notions of being predestined to fail; Ross's mention of sociology and astrology is not fortuitous in the sense he is introducing in the ongoing discussion of American identity ideas common among those who made grunge what it had come to be. Mentioning astrology in a discussion about grunge is not wholly laughable, as part of what made the movement were certain concepts about doomed fatality which echo perfectly with astrological predesigns; the famous lines from Nirvana's "Something in the Way," where Cobain sings, "It's okay to eat fish / 'cause they don't have any feelings,"—where "fish" is a reference to the singer's astrologic sign—are just the most famous example of how such things were ingrained in the way of thinking about life and, by extension, in songwriting.

Nirvana was a commercial diversification that got out of hand, mostly because they were much better than a mere publicity stunt. In a way, Nirvana's significance got so out of hand MTV's treatment of the band as an alternative act soon became pitiful. Ross, again, explains why the band could have held a mainstream position for so long while simultaneously holding nuances of belonging to a commercial fringe:

Punk's obsession was autonomy—independent labels, clubs installed in suburban garages and warehouses, flyers and fanzines photocopied at temp jobs after hours. Some of the music was vulgar and dumb, some of it ruggedly inventive; rock finally had a viable avant-garde. In the eighties, this do-it-yourself network solidified into indie rock, anchored in college radio stations and alternative newspapers. Dumbness persisted, but there were always scattered bands picking out weird, rich chords and giving no thought to a major-label future.

Nirvana, who enjoyed local celebrity on the indie scenes of Aberdeen, Olympia, and Seattle, Washington, before blundering into the mainstream, were perfectly poised between the margin and the center. The band didn't have to dilute itself to make the transition, because its brand of grunge rock already drew more on the thunderous tread of hard rock and heavy metal than on the clean, fast, matter-of-fact attack of punk or hardcore. Where punk and indie bands generally made vocals secondary to the disordered clamor of guitars, Nirvana depended on Cobain's resonantly snarling voice, an instrument full of commercial potential from the start. But the singer was resolutely punk in spirit. (Ross 223)



The punk spirit Ross mentions about Cobain is there along with all media exposure and with the millions of records sold, a presence to be picked up by anyone who cared to look; fame just made it possible for more people to be able to exert such an attention and identify with it.

Ross states how Cobain “was happy to discover that high schools were divided between Nirvana kids and Guns n’ Roses kids” (224). A distinction between those who listened to Nirvana and those who listened to Guns n’ Roses is not just a distinction of taste, it is a distinction between personalities, as Ross points out in this description:

Pop songs become the property of their fans and are marked with the circumstances of their consumption, not their creation. An unsought listenership can brand the music indelibly, as the Beatles discovered when Charles Manson embraced “Helter Skelter.” Or as Cobain discovered when a recording of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was played at a Guns n’ Roses show in Madison Square Garden while women in the audience were ogled on the giant video screens. (Ross 224)

Ogling women was not, obviously, something anyone listening to Nirvana was expected to do; but the idea the song could be played while someone was doing it is equally offensive. In that sense, not only do pop songs become property of their fans, but they also become marks of identity for those fans. While many believe these fans are a special kind of people (the Manson kind, the following-bands-around kind, or, in another example, the tattooing kind), what Ross is simply underlining is songs have a meaning beyond the intentions the author had when writing them and that misunderstanding those intentions is part of their life span. Such might be a fairly obvious judgment, which is true for other types of art, although Ross’s point is much wider than that: he is claiming songs become associated with a particular meaning and people tend to be offended when such meaning is challenged; meaning, in this sense, is not just related with interpretations of the music but with ideas about the kind of places and circumstances such songs should be played in, as if the wrong use of songs might somehow diminish them and/or their listeners.

Similar to what happened with Joy Division’s *Closer*, Nirvana’s last album, *In Utero* (1993), became different after Cobain’s suicide;<sup>73</sup> probably the suicide changed not only that last album but, as Ross points out, the band’s whole career: “Certainly, the shotgun blast casts a different light on Cobain’s career; the lyrics all sound like suicide notes now” (225). (Keeping in mind that *I Hate Myself and I Want to Die* was a working title for the album, one could wonder if the songs were not always meant to be suicide notes.)

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<sup>73</sup> Kurt Cobain shot himself in the head on April 5, 1994.

Nothing was more haunted by the suicide than Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York* (1994), a very intimate concert featuring some of the band's most notable performances, not only of their songs but also of other bands' covers. Those who hold the band's prominence was an MTV publicity act fail to notice the band was much better than such a simplification might imply; so, by a very ironic consequence, it was through MTV that Kurt Cobain's genius as a songwriter would come to be sanctioned for posterity—by the stripping of his songs to their basic structures in the unplugged format, people came to notice how Cobain was a fine songwriter. *In Utero*, besides showing the band's maturity, was a magnificent collection of magnificent songs; Brian Willis, an *NME* critic who listened to the album first hand, would characterize it this way: "If Freud could hear it, he'd wet his pants in anticipation," adding that it was "an album pregnant with irony and insight. *In Utero* is Kurt's revenge" (Cross 280); but for many, recognition of Cobain's qualities came only after the *Unplugged*, where the songs were stripped from the noise and distortion which characterized Nirvana, laying bare their structures and exposing a lyrical sensibility contrasting with the violence of what was identified as Nirvana's sound.

Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged in New York*, featuring just two songs from *In Utero* ("Pennyroyal Tea" and "All Apologies"), works as the summoning up of a career and, in the aftermath of Cobain's suicide, it necessarily became testimonial; suddenly it is not just the lyrics which come across as suicide notes, it is the also the tone Cobain sings in during the show which has suicidal airs. Cross describes the show in this manner: "At several turns it seemed as if the weight of an angel's wing could cause him to fold, yet the songs aided him: These words and riffs were so much a part of him he could sing them half dead and they'd still be potent. It was Kurt's single greatest moment onstage, and like all the high-water marks of his career, it came at a time when he seemed destined to fail" (Cross 293). Immediately claimed as a classic, the show stands as one of the most accomplished moments in recent music, beyond any categorization or commercially inflated dismissal. Featuring, against usual expectations for such a show, some of the lesser known songs from the band's repertoire and many covers, from David Bowie to Lead Belly, the performances recorded encapsulate what it was that made the band's fame while, at the same time, framing the main themes which made grunge a musical movement broad enough to define a generation of Americans; it was, in a very strict sense, a demonstration of what American music was at a certain moment in time. Of the many unplugged shows MTV recorded, featuring such different performers as De La Soul, Eric Clapton, or Kiss, it was the grunge bands which made the most of them and it

became the perfect setting for the validation of bands as Pearl Jam (1992) or Alice in Chains (1996), two of the most noteworthy Northwestern bands. Nonetheless, it was with Nirvana's *Unplugged* that grunge, as a genre, came to be artistically validated, and furthermore, it was through this show the genre's main features came to be assessed.

It would only be fitting, then, that the same setting might mark the tipping point where the movement's decline into oblivion began. On Valentine's Day 1995, Hole had their opportunity in the format. Led by Courtney Love, Cobain's widow, Hole's show might have been the moment which officially marked the end for grunge's viability as a musical movement, not ending it, but diminishing the creative possibilities within it. Dressed all in black, less than a year after her husband's suicide, Love chose this show to pay homage to Cobain's memory. But if in hindsight Cobain's lyrics had gained a different tonality after his suicide, Love's performance in this show would always be subject to her husband's death and to her boisterous public life. The melodramatic pathos surrounding the show goes to such an extent it verges on the ridiculous, shattering to pieces any meaning one might have thought of for each song. Pressured by the media for her flamboyant lifestyle and for the incidents she endured with drugs, leading to problems concerning the custody of the couple's child, Love's exuberance was under close scrutiny. Accusations in several newspapers and magazines ran from lack of talent to substance abuse, from an ongoing accusation about her being responsible for her husband's exposure to hard drugs<sup>74</sup> to several possible love affairs, from responsibility for the suicide to conspiracy theories in which she supposedly paid someone to kill her husband. Under this kind of media pressure, Love's choice of songs is bold in the sense she is not afraid of songs resonating with what her public image was: the lines "Burn the witch, the witch is dead / Burn the witch, burn the witch / Just bring me back her head," from "Softer, Softest," for instance, have no relation to the lyrics' original meaning but only to Love's current situation. The song, featured in *Live Through This* (1994), an album ironically released a few days after Cobain's suicide, had the album's lyrics changed from "I've got a blister from / Touching everything I see" to "I've got a blister from / Touching everyone I see," surely an update to fit better with grunge's reassessment after Nirvana's *Unplugged*. Until that moment, grunge was perceived as the result of a generation's lethargic treatment of their world; after Cobain's unique performance, and subsequent suicide, a humanization of the movement followed and it began to be more about particular individuals relating to what passed as "normal,"

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<sup>74</sup> An accusation long refuted by Charles Cross, based on testimonies from people who knew Cobain's dealings with drugs prior to meeting Love.

or “standard”: the word “everything” is an effect of the generalization while the word “everyone” is the outcome of the humanization. Hole’s second album was already an update from the more punkish approach the band had in their first album, an evolution allowed by Love’s relationship with her husband but also by grunge’s popularity. Nonetheless, this tinkering with the lyrics required the kind of analysis of grunge only possible after her husband’s death, when grunge was no longer dismissed as a mere generic fancy. Hole’s *Unplugged* was in line with that and the change in the lyric demonstrates how Love had the sensibility to readjust her songs to the shifting assessment which was being made of American music at the time.

The tension throughout Hole’s show is noticeable both in the choices made for the set list and in Love’s performance, examples abounding where things resonate in a different manner than they would have in any other circumstances. For instance, at a certain point Love introduces “He Hit Me,” a Carole King song; taking into account she had once called the police to arrest Cobain on domestic violence charges, Love was surely aware of the relevance the song would have for the audience. Another example of how the show’s quality is dependent on the pathos surrounding Cobain’s suicide is the song “Asking For It.” According to Love, it was inspired by an incident during one of her shows; Kim France, recovering Love’s description of the incident, comments on the song in an article about feminism in rock:

Things are never that simple in Love-land. The song “Asking For It” was inspired, she told an interviewer, by the experience of stage-diving into the crowd at a show: “Suddenly, it was like my dress was being torn off me, my underwear was torn off me, people were putting their fingers inside of me and grabbing my breasts really hard.” The worst thing, she went on, was seeing a photograph of herself later “and I had a big smile on my face like I was pretending it wasn’t happening. I can’t compare it to rape because it isn’t the same. But in a way it was. I was raped by an audience—figuratively, literally, and yet, was I asking for it?” The song is a more nuanced treatment than any ten essays about date rape of the way women can feel torn between the desire to be driven by their sexuality and the horror that the desire might ultimately degrade or even destroy them. (France 42)

Nonetheless, all considerations about the song are put aside by what surrounds the performance and when Love sings:

If you live through this with me  
I swear that I will die for you  
And if you live through this with me  
I swear that I will die for you

what resounds through it is not the date rape victim’s suffering but her husband’s suicide; the song, written and recorded while Cobain was still alive, might be about all the

things Love and France mention, but, at that moment, at that precise moment, its meaning is subdued by the circumstances. Another example of how circumstances shape the songs is given in the introduction to the last song of the set, when Love says she will play a new song she has not chosen a title for yet; she announces there are two possible titles, “Sugar Coma” or “I Slept With the Devil,” and just before starting the song, she decides the title will be “Sugar Coma”: under the description of the circumstances surrounding the show, how could she decide for “I Slept With the Devil”?

The situation was so pathetic even a previously-unreleased song written by Cobain, an important moment in 1995, was presented by MTV as “You’ve Got No Right” when the title of the song is “You Know You’re Right.” Charles Cross identifies the song as one of Cobain’s most accomplished moments as a lyricist:

Lyricaly, the verses were tightly crafted, with a haunting, tormented chorus of “You know you’re right.” The first verse was a list of declarations beginning with, “I would never bother you / I would never promise to / If I say that word again / I would move away from here.” One couplet—that could only come from Kurt Cobain—went: “I am walking in the piss / Always knew it would come to this.” The second verse shifts to statements about a woman—“She just wants to love herself”—and closes with two lines that have to be sarcastic: “Things have never been so swell / And I have never been so well.” The plaintive wail in the chorus couldn’t be clearer: “Pain,” he cried, stretching the word out for almost ten seconds, giving it four syllables, and leaving an impression of inescapable torment. (Cross 306)

Curiously enough, the Nirvana song, only officially released on *Nirvana* (2002), has many differences in the lyrics to the ones Cross remarks in this paragraph. The couplet introducing the “plaintive” cry of “Pain” is the one sung by Love in Hole’s *Unplugged*, and not the one sung by Cobain; probably moved by Love’s version of the song, Cross also identifies one couplet which could have only come from Cobain but which was actually sung just by Love. The original Nirvana version runs:

I won’t move away from here  
You won’t be afraid of fear  
No thought was put into this  
Always knew it would come to this  
Things have never been so swell  
I have never failed to fail.

Hole’s version has some relevant differences:

I won’t move away from here  
You won’t be afraid of fear  
I am walking in the piss  
Always knew it would come to this  
Things have never been so swell  
I have never felt so well.

The ongoing quibbling about this song, most likely the last song written and recorded by Cobain before his suicide, demonstrates how relevant it was and has caused a never-ending debate among fans about the lyrics and their meaning; the song's relevance might also be attested by the fact it was only released in 2002 after a legal battle between Love and the remaining Nirvana members.

In 1995, during Hole's unplugged, Love introduced the song as having been written by Cobain, adding she and her band "had worked a little bit" on it; the "worked a little bit" might refer to not having time to rehearse it or to rewriting some parts of it, causing changes which might be the result of carelessness or of some actual thinking about the original song. Although some carelessness definitely went into it, what Love's performance reveals is she made adjustments to remove some of Cobain's personal traits from the song, mainly because she understood there were some things she could not sing (much as she could not title a song "I Slept With the Devil"); Love, a very outspoken feminist, would never be able to sing she "never fails to fail," as that would allow for certain gender interpretations. I am not claiming this was actually a line of thought Love pondered but it is a way of thinking inbuilt in how one does things (such as writing lyrics). The same might be said for changing the cry of "pain" for the less meaningful "hey," which technically accomplishes the same function without the depreciative allusions. Misreading or changing the line "No thought was put into this" to the line about "walking in the piss" is another way of making the song hers, as the autobiographical reference in "Softer, Softest" announces: "Pee-girl gets the belt."<sup>75</sup> It would also be against her nature that, under such circumstances as the ones I am trying to describe, she could even pretend to never have thought about the implications of her singing such a reckless line as "No thought was put into this"; the accusations she had reached fame by marrying someone famous ran parallel with the accusations she was talentless, and this line would validate such accusations. While her qualities as a songwriter do not match her husband's, she understands perfectly how some lines are completely barred to her.

The pathos surrounding Love's song is stressed by the line she introduces to replace Cobain's line about failing: in Cobain's version, the sarcasm is marked by the word "swell," a word connoted with an older generation, and the sentence in which it is used is set to clash against the cry of "pain" following; however, it accomplishes more,

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<sup>75</sup> Love has made reference to being called and teased as the "pee-girl" while a young girl.

by holding an ironic relation not only to what precedes it, a line ambiguously referring to a state of affairs that was expected, but also to what follows, a line masking failure by denoting it as a quality (“never failing” is an ability). Love’s sarcasm is much more marked by changing the couplet and rhyming “swell” with “well;”<sup>76</sup> her version resonates from the sarcasm that the rhyming puts into the lines, a sarcasm not met by the necessary clashing of the word “pain” and which also lacks the implication things are swell in relation to her own abilities. Love’s sarcasm is held in relation to the prior line, implying it is the situation which is under sarcasm’s radar (Cross’s reference to the sarcasm implied by these lines is correct and sharp since he quotes Love’s version). In her version, it is the circumstances which call for sarcasm while in Cobain’s the implicit irony introduces another layer to the crudity of the sarcastic “swell” and shifts the attention from the circumstances to the author’s responsibility in creating such circumstances, a difference underlining the personal traits of each singer. Love’s quality lies in understanding some things are not accessible to her as they were to her husband. And it is not just that the circumstances did not allow for such a sentimental approximation to Cobain’s strong legacy, it is also an instinctual reading about what it is to face such a legacy; Cobain’s suicide had taken grunge as far as it could go, resulting in any cry about self-mockery becoming, by comparison, a pastiche and thus meaningless. In the pathetic situation Love finds herself in, she moves away from the shadow of her husband by recognizing the impossibility of reproducing the kind of thematic approach to songwriting he had popularized and that had, by that time, been turned into a movement. Perhaps the tipping point for an artistic movement’s downfall is the moment when the pathos which defines it turns melodramatic; Hole’s unplugged is such a moment, the melodrama being held on the line separating it from ridicule. Probably not coincidentally, there was a revival of punk band’s popularity in the aftermath of grunge’s decay, as some kind of pathological reaction to such high levels of self-degradation.

The *MTV Unplugged* series is now connected to grunge as if the movement had inspired it to begin with; but, beyond the grunge bands, other artists were an integral part of the show.<sup>77</sup> Among them was Bob Dylan, who in 1995 released his own *MTV Unplugged*. The album was the result of two intimate concerts held on November 17 and 18, 1994, at Sony Studios in New York, and features some of Dylan’s classics, a concession on Dylan’s part. In the aftermath of two albums of traditional songs (*Good as I Been to You* and *World Gone Wrong*), Dylan was rebuilding his career on an idea about

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<sup>76</sup> The first time she sings it she does not sing “swell” but “well.”

<sup>77</sup> *Eric Clapton Unplugged* (1992) reached number one on the most sold albums list (Sounes 408).

what American music was and how he himself could be figured within that idea. The unplugged was to be a part of his reinvention, but Dylan decided not to move against MTV's wishes:

I wasn't quite sure how to do it and what material to use. I would have liked to do old folk songs with acoustic instruments, but there was a lot of input from other sources as to what would be right for the MTV audience. The record company said, "You can't do that, it's too obscure." At one time, I would have argued, but there's no point. OK, so what's not obscure? They said "Knockin' on Heaven's Door." (Gundersen)

The show, while featuring less expected numbers such as "Dignity," at the time still officially unreleased, was built by Dylan's recreations of old songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone," "Tombstone Blues," or "The Times They Are A-Changin'." Contrasting with the grunge bands, which were moving away from their natural position by accepting to play unplugged, Dylan would be completely familiar with such a format. Nonetheless, by reshaping his old songs into something hardly recognizable, Dylan made it impossible for anyone to empathize with his work: there was no pathos one could relate to. Having no pathos to relate to, all that is left is technical virtuosity, which, in Dylan's unplugged, was hardly memorable.

Dylan, at the time worried about rebuilding his career, seems to have had no particular sensibility towards what was happening in American music; in spite of this lack of attention, he is said to have proclaimed, on listening to Nirvana's "Polly": "The kid has heart" (Cross 137). The remark was naturally stimulated by the traditional lineage of the song: "Polly" is a reference to a family of traditional compositions and that obviously resonates with Dylan, as it would resonate Lead Belly's "Where Did You Sleep Last Night?" which Nirvana played in their unplugged. Anyone who cared to spend some time listening to the musical production of this period might have realized the hegemony of American music had, at its base, a relation to the American musical past Dylan is constantly seeking connection to. In that sense, Dylan's lack of attention to what was happening around him was a step back in his attempt to recover from his bad career decisions during the 1980s, not only by the decision to redo his old hits but also by accepting to play "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," a song popularized for younger audiences by Guns n' Roses, an act nothing more than the last remains of the hard rock strain of musicians who had proved to be a wrong kind of association for Dylan. Dylan was not naive enough to have missed what was happening, as he recognized there had been a time "before the celestial grunge, before the insane world of entertainment exploded in our faces" (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 675); his reaction to it was of the



same kind as that of people who believe commercial success always means lesser art forms: to dismiss it altogether. Remembering his own career, he might have had in mind that these types of mainstream manifestations would end up, as they always do, in pathetic moments which would have no artistic relevance: in a sense, a bunch of people holding arms while singing “We Shall Overcome” was as pathetic a moment as can be thought of.

During this period, perhaps noticing how there was some relation between this new wave of American bands and his own musical past, Johnny Cash recorded *American Recordings*, taking American music’s hegemony as an opportunity to rebuild his career by his association with younger musicians. Sean Wilentz, describing Dylan’s 2001 album, “*Love and Theft*”, says:

Several years before “*Love and Theft*” appeared, Johnny Cash released an excellent album of traditional songs that he called *American Recordings*. “*Love and Theft*” could have the same title, though Dylan’s musical reach is even wider than the great Cash’s was, and his minstrelsy more complicated. He unfurled the American flag once again, the masked man remaking his art out of (mainly) American materials. (Wilentz 270)

Dylan, however, would push aside any such comparison in an interview with Douglas Brinkley for *Rolling Stone*; when asked if he missed Cash, who had died in 2003, Dylan answers: “Yeah, I do. I do miss him. But I started missing him 10 years before he actually kicked the bucket.” Asked to clarify why he already missed Cash ten years before his actual death, Dylan explains: “You know, it’s hard to talk about. I tell people if they are interested that they should listen to Johnny on his Sun records and reject all that notorious low-grade stuff he did in his later years. It can’t hold a candlelight to the frightening depth of the man that you hear on his early records. That’s the only way he should be remembered” (Brinkley). According to Dylan, Cash’s songs lack “depth,” a feeling which appears similar to the “heart” Dylan identified in Nirvana’s “Polly”; what Dylan is implying is Cash’s success with younger audiences in the 1990s was the result of a misconception: audiences were relating to a preconceived idea of who Cash was and not to who Cash actually was at that moment.

In a 2004 interview with Ed Bradley, for the show *60 Minutes*, Dylan starts by noting how he cannot relate to the man who wrote the songs making him famous in the 1960s, suggesting not that he was someone else, as many people believe, but that he evolved to a point in his life where his beliefs and creative practices had changed; in the same interview, he implied there was a kind of magic in writing those early songs, “not the Siegfried and Roy kind,” which means it is not the kind of magic reproducible on

request: singing those songs cannot bring back the feelings which motivated them. Dylan is implying that when Cash sings “I See a Darkness,” we relate to an idea of who Cash was and not to the human being who is actually singing and that that is not different from people asking Dylan to play his old hits as if their mere reproduction would bring back the Dylan from the 1960s. A song, in Dylan’s view, is like a poem for the critic John Hollander: “The soul is always there—every poem is “about” its author, always” (100). The difference between a poem and a song, as Dylan put it in an interview in 1989, is that the song is “not on the page. It’s got a life of its own” (Heylin, *Behind the Shades* 682). For Dylan, a song’s life does not end after it is recorded and, as so, every performance is like a new poem and must reinstate the soul of the singer; Dylan’s endless rebuilding of his own songs is an attempt to insufflate each performance with his own life. A song without “depth,” “heart,” or, in Hollander’s rendition, without “soul,” is just meaningless noise, for these feelings are the vehicles we recognize other human beings through.

## The Dylanologists

The word Dylanology was coined by Alan Jules Weberman (known as A. J. Weberman), and refers to the study of Bob Dylan's songs and life. In 2005, Weberman published the *Dylan to English Dictionary*, where he proposes a code to decipher Dylan's lyrics, a complex analytical system which, in Weberman's own words, could "never be fully explained or demystified" (Kinney 63). As an extension of his investigations about Dylan, Weberman also coined the term Garbology, referring to a science based on the study of items found in famous people's garbage as a way into their personal life and the true nature of their feelings. Garbology was put to test at 94 MacDougal Street, the location of the house Dylan bought, when he relocated from Woodstock to New York, in 1970, with his family. It was at this address Weberman started going through Dylan's garbage, and it was while Dylan lived there that Weberman managed to have a couple of conversations with him; eventually, Weberman's harassment led to a physical confrontation where Dylan assaulted him for disturbing his family. Howard Sounes explains, in the few pages he dedicates to Weberman, that among the many things which made Weberman relatively famous, there was the protest organization he formed, the Dylan Liberation Front (DLF), and a very public investigation about rumors, which Weberman himself spread, of Dylan's possible heroin dependency (Sounes 264-8). David Kinney, in his work about Dylan's fans, *The Dylanologists*, quotes an interview with Greil Marcus to explain something Weberman embodies hyperbolically:

"Why are Dylan fans the worst?" an interviewer once asked music writer Greil Marcus. He didn't mean *all* Dylan fans. He meant obsessives like Weberman.

"I don't know the answer to that. There's no question you're right," Marcus said. "Hm. Not just the worst—they're the stupidest. I think it's because something in Dylan's writing leads people to believe that there is a secret behind every song. And if you unlock that secret then you'll understand the meaning of life. Like every song is this treasure chest, and nothing is what it seems." (Kinney 63)

Weberman is usually the example of fans going too far in their obsessions for idols, the other two examples of such type of fanaticism being Charles Manson (and his obsession with 'The Beatles' "Helter Skelter"), and Mark Chapman's assassination of John Lennon, in 1980. Weberman is usually taken as an example on the basis of the mostly harmless, although histrionic, nature of his relationship with Dylan, even though he embodies, along with other less public figures, the dangers of feeding such idolatry: there were

moments in Dylan's life he thought he could eventually have the same destiny as Lennon.

Weberman is not the only case of lunacy attached to Dylan's career. Sounes tells the story of Australian Richard Dickinson who had an obsession with Dylan's *Desire* (1976):

Indeed, Bob's music had always seemed to excite the mentally unstable. In perhaps the most bizarre case of fanaticism, Richard Dickinson of Hobart, Australia, became so fed up in 1987 with his mother complaining about him playing the *Desire* album in the middle of the night that he trampled her to death to the accompaniment of "One More Cup of Coffee." (He was found not guilty of murder on grounds of insanity and jailed for an indefinite period.) (Sounes 393)

Since the beginning of his career Dylan has been plagued with excessive attention from his fans, particularly after his departure from the folk movement he began his career in, culminating in the famous "Judas" episode in Manchester.<sup>78</sup> People have always harassed Dylan in public, stalked him, trespassed on his properties, appeared at his house in the middle of the night: in one case, a couple was found having intercourse in Dylan's bedroom (in his house in Woodstock, in the late 1960s); during the 1980s, two women changed their surname to Dylan and followed Dylan's tour, presenting themselves as his wives at hotels and concert venues. A man named Bill Pagel, for instance, moved to Hibbing in 2006 in the hopes of buying Dylan's infancy house; when the owners refused to sell, he bought the house next door and decided to wait for his opportunity.<sup>79</sup> While harassment and stalking have been an important part of Dylan's relationship to his most loyal fans, some have kept their lunacy more private: the collectors of memorabilia and/or bootlegs, the faithful number of tour followers, and the nameless (and countless) who have followed and kept track of Dylan's career throughout the years: they have diligently kept records of performances, recordings, film footage, interviews, references of every sort, and anything worth noting about Dylan; Dylanology's pejorative connotations were gradually transformed by these people's devotion to the singer and the term came to include a particular strain of Dylan's fans who are, in different ways, engaged in studying and collecting Dylan related materials (academic scholars focusing

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<sup>78</sup> During Dylan's concert at the Manchester Free Trade Hall, in 1966, someone shouted "Judas" at him, in a reference to Dylan having switched the acoustic guitar for an electric guitar; Dylan answered back "I don't believe you, you're a liar," and led the Hawks, the band he was playing with, into a rendition of "Like a Rolling Stone," by asking them to "play it fucking loud."

<sup>79</sup> Among the items in Pagel's collection, which include an unknown amount of papers and memorabilia from many different sources, Kinney notes Dylan's family house in Duluth, Dylan's highchair, a ceramic bowl that once belonged to Dylan's grandmother, 1957-9 yearbooks from Hibbing High, and a ticket from Dylan's prom (Kinney 23-9).

on the singer's work are also referred to as Dylanologists). These people form a special community keeping in touch through self-released fanzines or mail correspondence and, since the Internet, blogs and fans sites. When citing Marcus' comment, Kinney makes special case of pointing out the question about Dylan's fans being the worst was not meant at including "*all*" the fans, just the "obsessives like Weberman"; but how does one distinguish these two categories? Where does one draw the line? Maybe there is no line to be drawn.

In his very sober book about the many implications of being a Dylan fan, a sobriety particularly noticeable if one attends to the nature of the topic, Kinney moves along Dylan's career tracking stories of his most famous fans and talking to many who are part of the anonymous crowd following Dylan around the world. Kinney, instead of looking from the outside, begins by establishing himself as a fan, referring to his devotion to Dylan as an addiction: "For the longest time, I felt alone in this addiction, and a little crazy. No one in my world took Dylan as seriously as I did. But it also seemed as though I was in on a secret. In time I came to realize that there were many others like me—an entire underground nation of unreformed obsessives. I had a people" (3). The expression "unreformed obsessives" is particularly telling of Kinney's position in his book: contrary to Marcus, who sets himself apart from Dylan's fans, Kinney does not draw any line of separation between himself and people such as Weberman: they both manifest different symptoms although suffering from the same disease.

The relationship these fans maintain with Dylan varies from case to case. Some relate to the music: "The second time he listened to 'Like a Rolling Stone,' something clicked. It was the first time he could ever remember not feeling alone. He never forgot how that had comforted him as a teenager. 'Somebody spoke to me,' he said. 'Somebody understood'" (210); some relate to the man who makes the music:

"He and I have been through a lot together and *he doesn't know it,*" she said. "He doesn't know I exist. Can you see how that would be frustrating? I don't have any grandiose idea that because he's affected me he's going to care. I just think it's not fair that it's a one-way relationship." [...] "I don't think he's Jesus, I don't think he's the messiah. He's just a human being. But he's filled with poetry." (Kinney 222)

Others cannot distinguish the music from the singer: "I just wanted him to know that I existed and that I loved what he did,' he said. 'But it goes deeper than that. I don't know why, but if Bob is sad, or his music is sad, I feel sad, and I feel sad for him. When he's singing and he's hurting, it hurts me, too'" (137). In any of these cases, no matter where the attention lies (the songs, the man, or both), it is naive, I believe, to say it is not the

music which mediates the relationship: these people are united by their love for the music, whether they believe it to be biographic, or prophetic, or just intense: the emotions are brought on by the songs.

Among Kinney's many accounts, two examples demonstrate the way songs bring about emotions. In the first case, Kinney describes the story of Peter Brown, a man who spent his entire life listening to Dylan and who earned a respectful place on the Internet world of Dylan's fans as a *connoisseur*. Peter discovered Dylan around 1963, when he was only twelve, and immersed himself in his songs; following a family move in which he had to be transferred from a private to a public school, in a suburb of New Jersey, Peter, as most teenagers would, got into some trouble. He was sent to a therapist and, after a few sessions, they had not accomplished any major breakthrough. One day Peter decided to take a portable turntable to the sessions and played "It's All Right, Mama (I'm Only Bleeding)," a song from Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home*. "'This is how I feel,' Peter told the shrink. 'Everything that I'm trying to tell you is on this record. It's all there'" (47). In a second example, Kinney tells the story of Lucas Stensland, a Dylan fan from St. Cloud, Minnesota; Lucas explains how Dylan came to be associated with his own personal emotions since hearing "Where Are You Tonight?" on the aftermath of being left by a girlfriend: "The song captured his hurt and alienation so perfectly, with such honesty and beauty. Lucas felt a kinship with Dylan. He didn't know anybody who could give him more than pat advice when he just wanted somebody to understand the turmoil he felt. But the song understood" (96). The reaction to this particular situation became a regular happening throughout Lucas' life: when he felt at "the lowest of lows," then "Dylan's music stepped in to save him"; the songs "illuminated how he was feeling. Lucas could play some song and find that it said exactly how he felt at that moment. Lucas would listen to Dylan with girlfriends. Songs would grow into *their* songs" (98). Just as in the previous case, Lucas had to go to therapy, having been diagnosed with anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder in his teens; the therapy helped, no doubt, but Dylan's songs, with lyrics "he carried around in his head like refrains," would help the most. Kinney, after interviewing Lucas, explains:

Lucas was a depressed high schooler, and he knows that it sounds silly, but when he'd think about killing himself—not for real, just in that adolescent way of thinking heavy thoughts to make himself feel important—he racked his brain to come up with one good reason not to do it. The reason wasn't God, of course. It wasn't because he looked forward to college or a job or life after he got out of St. Cloud. It was this simple: He was a Dylan fan, and he wanted to hear the next record. (Kinney 97)

In both cases, a pathological disorder may have taken part in the relationship with Dylan's work, although it is not clear if it was a cause or a consequence; because of the pathological nature of the examples, in some sense the descriptions entitle the songs with therapeutic properties. Nonetheless, the most interesting aspect about these two stories has to do with justifications: songs explain things better than any amount of talking both Peter and Lucas might do. There is also a hint songs have been used as touchstones for particular emotions, as if they did not only explain but also taught certain things (the ability to feel certain things only becoming possible after hearing particular songs).

So far, most of these relationships with Dylan seem to originate at an early age, which might induce vulnerabilities specific to certain stages in one's life; nevertheless, others have confessed to have been driven to the artist much later. In 1997, Alex Ross, needing to write a profile of Dylan for *The New Yorker*, on the release of *Time Out of Mind*, followed Dylan during one of his extensive tours; unaccustomed to listening to Dylan and to dealing with Dylan-related issues, Ross described his relation to the singer in this manner:

I'd read a story that went something like this. He was born in Minnesota. He went to Greenwich Village. He wrote protest songs. He stopped writing protest songs. He took drugs, "went electric." He was booed. He fell off his motorcycle. He disappeared into a basement. He reappeared and sang country. He got divorced. He converted to Christianity. He converted back to something else. He croaked somewhere behind Stevie Wonder in "We Are the World." And so on. If you're not in the right age group, the collected bulletins of Dylan's progress read like alumni notes from a school you didn't attend. (Ross 271)

Ross names his article "I Saw the Light," a reference to the title of a Hank Williams gospel song; about Williams' song, Ross says it is "a would-be uplifting gospel number that was really filled with terror," implying that when Williams sings, in a descending melody: "I saw the light, I saw the light, / No more darkness, no more night," he is lying (286). What Ross is suggesting, in accordance with his point on Dylan, is that the descending melody betrays the words and one ends doubting what is being sung; the words are, in this position, questioned and changed by the music. Ross believes that something similar happens with Dylan, that what makes him engaging is the music and the tonalities it can inflict on what is being sung: "But to hear Dylan live is to realize that he *is* a musician—of an eccentric and mesmerizing kind. It's hard to pin down what he does: he is a composer and a performer at once, and his shows cause his songs to mutate, so that no definitive or ideal version exists. Dylan's legacy will be the sum of thousands

of performances, over many decades” (270).<sup>80</sup> (Many Dylanologists believe this to be true and have thus set out to accomplish the task of having the complete performances of Dylan.<sup>81</sup>) What Ross infers when hinting at having seen the light is that he too, although later than most people, has been converted to Dylan. Ross’s essay is thus an attempt at understanding the source of Dylan’s attraction: his conclusion being it is not the man’s personality or his poetic words which hold attraction, but how the music he plays constantly challenges ideas about his personality and his lyrics.

Conversion to the world of Dylanology is not a one-way street and some admit to having renounced Dylan. In 2001, after the release of *Love and Theft*, an online debate among fans begun about the amount of references one could find in the album and if those references could not be counted as plagiarism; many fans, using the Internet, added contributions stating the many sources they perceived in the songs (like so many critics, they ignored the programmatic function of the album’s title—not unintentionally, the title is between quotation marks). The most resonant of all discoveries was made by Chris Johnson, a Minnesotan schoolteacher, who discovered, quite by accident, that many lines in the album could be found in an obscure book by Junichi Saga, *Confessions of a Yakuza* (1991).<sup>82</sup> With the release of *Chronicles*, in 2004, the discussion reached its peak, with the discovery that entire sentences could be found in other books, particularly discontinued Jack London’s novels. Roy Kelly, an English poet and librarian, was among those fans who expressed their outrage publicly at the hint of plagiarism:

Kelly was deeply unsettled to find out that the words were not all Dylan’s. “What did we praise him for then?” he says now. He felt misled, foolish, and let down—*personally* let down. Why not acknowledge his sources in some way? Why pass it off as his own? It prompted him to question not just the memoir but the music and the man. Was he entirely inauthentic? “All songs by Bob Dylan,” the liner notes read. Kelly had believed that. He couldn’t feel quite the same way about a cut-and-paste man. “It just bothers me,” he says. “And I can’t be unbothered now.” (Kinney 169-70)

One should naturally remark the irony in an English poet/librarian feeling offended by accusations of plagiarism: how would he define his own life? But the description of disillusionment is symptomatic of how fans have a tendency for exaggeration in treating Dylan-related issues. In defense of fans, one must state that most reactions to Dylan-

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<sup>80</sup> Not coincidentally, Christopher Ricks recently edited a book compiling all Dylan’s lyrics and their variations throughout all the known bootlegs: *The Lyrics: Since 1962* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

<sup>81</sup> “The more tapes they got, the more they obsessed over uncovering the rest. The aim was to be complete, to own everything, every concert, every studio outtake, every known tape floating around anywhere in the world. Some completists were not satisfied until they owned every taper’s recording of a particular concert” (Kinney 80).

<sup>82</sup> Asked what he felt about Dylan’s use of lines from his work, Saga replied he was honored.



related issues is in no measure different than the treatment other people give to issues they consider relevant: we all have sentimental reactions to certain things other people do not seem to care about.

The possibility of online research and online publication gave rise to many more accusations of plagiarism, as people found and shared that certain melodic lines and chord progressions were identified as first occurring in old folk songs. Those who defend Dylan call attention, naturally, to the folk process, which depends exactly on the use of certain forms, as Wilentz explains: “Much of what sounded, to an unpracticed ear, like lifting amounted to no more than Dylan using commonplace phrases—sometimes known as floaters—that recur in innumerable blues, country, and folk songs, serving the singers as a sort of shorthand” (311). That is the way of tradition and, as Dylan put it to Mikal Gilmore: “It’s called tradition, and that’s what I deal in. Traditional, with a capital T.” In 2006, on the release of Dylan’s *Modern Times*, the plagiarism discussion was resumed due to the strange similarity some lines bore with the poetry of Henry Timrod, an obscure Southern poet known mostly for his poems on the Civil War (he was known as “the poet laureate of the Confederacy” (Rich)); if using floaters is part of the folk tradition, then using references to obscure poets is directly related to literature’s tradition. If there was a period where Dylan’s collages of references were resonant and histrionic, as in 1964-6, in the late Dylan they have become discreet and more intricate.

In the midst of some of this lunacy, search for validation in the admiration of one’s idol is, necessarily, a vital part in the attempt to preserve sanity: “Christopher Ricks—elected Oxford Professor of Poetry in 2004 and knighted in 2009—wrote as appreciatively of Bob Dylan as he had of Tennyson and Milton, and thereby lent legitimacy to the amateur intellectuals going on and on about the man’s singular genius” (Kinney 183). The legitimacy Ricks lends to amateurs’ activities is not necessarily related to the activity of criticism, which seems fairly legitimate but to the quality of their subject, as if a professional critic’s attention to Dylan’s work validated the singer’s quality (and, by extension, all the collecting and discussion about his work). Other critics have recognized Dylan has a relevant influence on their lives; Greil Marcus, one of the most respected Dylanologists, admits: “Along with a lot of other things, becoming a Bob Dylan fan made me a writer” (Marcus, *Writings* xvii). Artists also recognized not only Dylan’s relevance for their career, but Dylan’s special nature in the music world; Patti Smith tells how she and her sister spent their youth listening to, discussing and trying to imitate their music idols, among them Dylan: “We had stood in line for hours at Sam

Goody's to purchase *Blonde on Blonde*, combing Philadelphia in search of a scarf like the one Bob Dylan wore on the cover. We lit candles for him when he had his motorcycle accident" (19). Later, describing one of her performances, Smith tells the following story:

The night, as the saying goes, was a jewel in our crown. We played as one, and the pulse and pitch of the band spiraled us into another dimension. Yet with all that swirling around me, I could feel another presence as surely as the rabbit senses the hound. He was there. I suddenly understood the nature of the electric air. Bob Dylan had entered the club. This knowledge had a strange effect on me. Instead of humbled, I felt a power, perhaps his; but I also felt my own worth and the worth of my band. It seemed for me a night of initiation, where I had to become fully myself in the presence of the one I had modeled myself after. (Smith 248)

One could claim the idea of Dylan as a prophet-like figure, as a man above others, is dismissible, as part of some human beings' lunacy; yet Ross, Ricks, Marcus or Smith would not necessarily fit in with our notions of insanity and, through their socially legitimated sanity, one validates one's own. Naturally, a good source for validation is the artist himself: "At Sun Studios in Memphis, tour guides say Dylan strolled in one day while tourists were being shown around. He bent down to kiss the spot where Elvis stood while recording 'That's All Right' on July 5, 1954. Then he walked out. Someone chased after Dylan to gush about how much he loved him. 'Well, son,' Dylan answered, 'we all have our heroes'" (Kinney 32). Dylan's reverence to Elvis demonstrates we all may fall prey to lunacy, but it also reminds us that we are all, primarily, human beings: occasionally remembering our heroes are also human beings is a necessary act for preserving sanity.

Dylan's influence on audiences has not always been negative and, in another story, Kinney tells of Michelle Engert, a fan who was "absorbed into the tribe" of older fans "even though she was decades younger" (141). Michelle graduated from high school in 1990 and, instead of enrolling in college, she followed Dylan's tour for four years, sharing hours in lines with other followers to get into venues, fighting their way into the front row, expecting that the many hours in lines, waiting, would be repaid by some sort of recognition from Dylan (locking eye contact with their idol would be enough); the tribe Michelle was accepted into was basically made up of people who distinguished themselves from normal people who go to concerts to enjoy the music: this tribe had a purpose they did not know how to define but which went beyond mere entertainment. One time, Michelle's friends stopped in a German gas station in the middle of the night; she went into the convenience store and, suddenly, found herself face to face with Dylan himself. She said nothing, turned around and got back into her car: "What if they met

and Dylan treated Michelle cruelly? She would never be able to enjoy the music again” (141). After four years following Dylan, when it was time to make a decision on her future life, she decided to finally enroll in college:

Dylan’s songs had taught her something about love and politics, and about the power struggles in the world. They made her think about things from the underdog’s point of view. The songs pulled her into American history. Dylan listened to Guthrie, so she did, too, and you can’t listen to Guthrie without learning something about the Great Depression and the suffering of the dust bowl. “Bob brought me there,” she said. “Because he cared about it, I wanted to know what it was about. You either connect or you don’t, and I did.” (Kinney 143)

One could claim that making life decisions of such magnitude as choosing a college degree based on the infatuation with a singer is verging on lunacy, but one must be ready to admit Michelle’s college decision is not very different from going to certain colleges to follow a girlfriend (or boyfriend), to be with friends, to work with a particular professor, or just because a certain novel was set in a particular campus. In the end, based on her experiences within the world of Dylan she was made aware of certain social injustices and, prompted to act on them, she became a public defender: she believes “Dylan had made her a better lawyer” (143).

During the last years, in the few interviews he has given, Dylan has been trying to change the way people relate to his work, particularly to the work done before 1966. In the 2012 interview with Mikal Gilmore for *Rolling Stone*, Dylan put forward the idea the man who wrote all the songs before 1966 is dead, expanding notions he had proposed, for instance, in the 2004 interview appearing on *60 Minutes*, when he stated he could not relate in any way to the man who wrote those songs; in the case of the Gilmore interview, Dylan is not making a metaphorical statement, he is actually saying that the man who wrote those songs was killed in an accident—a motorcycle accident. Showing Gilmore a copy of *Hell’s Angel: The Life and Times of Sonny Barger and the Hell’s Angels Motorcycle Club*, by Sonny Barger, Dylan points out the name of the co-writers who worked with Barger in the book: Keith and Kent Zimmerman. Referring Gilmore to a particular passage of the book, Dylan makes the interviewer read the description of the motorcycle accident one of the presidents of a Hell’s Angels motorcycle club was killed in: his name was Bobby Zimmerman. The irony of someone with the same name given to Dylan upon his birth having died in a motorcycle accident seems to delight the singer and to allow him to introduce Gilmore to the notion of Transfiguration. Pressed by Gilmore to explain his idea, he makes it clear he is not thinking about Transmigration or Reincarnation, but is instead alluding to the Bible’s episode in which Jesus leads the

apostles Peter, James, and John to the Holy Mountain. According to the Gospels of Mark (9:2-8), Mathew (17:1-9), and Lucas (9:28-36), once on the Holy Mountain, Jesus' face begins to shine and He is Transfigured; Moses and Elijah appear on the mountain and speak with Jesus. When Peter suggests the production of three tabernacles, one for each prophet, a cloud descends upon the mountain, the prophets disappear, and God speaks to the apostles, confirming to them Jesus is indeed his son and should be heard: "listen to him" are God's words. While the passage has very deep implications within the Catholic Church, as it establishes Jesus as the true connection between the spiritual and the earthly worlds, what Dylan is trying to insinuate is that there is no coincidence between Bobby Zimmerman having died in a motorcycle accident and the change people perceived and pointed out in Dylan after his own motorcycle accident in 1966: the insinuation is that Robert Zimmerman died to give place to Bob Dylan. Dylan implies the Zimmerman accident's proximity to his own accident puts both figures in relation to one another:

Gilmore: I want to know more about the matter of transfiguration. Is there a specific moment in which you became aware of it?

Dylan: Yeah, I can refer you to the book [the Sonny Barger biography]. It happens gradually. I'd say that that accident, however, if you want to call it that, I think that was about '64? [*Referring to the death of Bobby Zimmerman, which, in fact, took place in 1961.*] As I said earlier, I had a motorcycle accident myself, in '66, so we're talking maybe about two years—a gradual kind of slipping away, and, uh, some kind of something else appearing out of nowhere. (Gilmore)

The italics identifying the actual date of Zimmerman's accident belong to Gilmore, who does not seem entirely convinced by this allusion to a religious episode; if, in fact, a Transfiguration happened, is it not an even more amazing coincidence Dylan mixes up the date? The Hell's Angel's president actually died in the same year Dylan arrived in New York (as many Dylanologists have pointed out, Zimmerman died within weeks of Robert Shelton's *New York Times* review which made Bob Dylan known). Dylan's attempt to extricate himself from those early years is an attempt at dismissing some of the preconceptions people have of him, particularly about him being a kind of leader or prophet-like personality; his attitude seems even more baffling since he is replacing those preconceptions with the kind of mystical episodes and connotations that seem more prone to giving way to even more ambiguity over those years.

One of the changes he is trying to introduce in the way people relate to his work has to do with the idea he is only a performer, challenging previous statements where he proclaimed he was not a mere actor:

My songs are personal music; they're not communal. I wouldn't want people singing along with me. It would sound funny. I'm not playing campfire meetings. I don't remember anyone singing along with Elvis, or Carl Perkins, or Little Richard. The thing you have to do is make people feel their own emotions. A performer, if he's doing what he's supposed to do, doesn't feel any emotion at all. It's a certain kind of alchemy that a performer has. (Gilmore)

Naturally, Dylan is advising, again, as in so many other times, that those who believe they can denote biography from songs will be disillusioned; but the man is there, in the personal songs and he cannot, and does not, dismiss that. It might be another claim for privacy, but privacy would be more easily attained by not making personal songs or ceasing publishing of any sorts. To keep writing and publishing songs is to put himself at the mercy of those who, as Kinney puts it, listen too hard:

We who listen too hard are compelled to do things that are difficult to talk about. We devour millions of words of scholarship on his life and work. We spend hours arguing about the songs. We celebrate new albums as important events; they help us mark time in our own lives. We manage towering collections of bootlegs and hunt down underground tapes. We find ourselves identifying with him, and quoting his choice lines in conversation. Some of us have been known to wake up in the morning and wonder what he's eating for breakfast and how he takes his coffee. We go off on pilgrimages: stomping through the timeless Greenwich Village streets where he first made it in 1961; trekking to Big Pink in Woodstock, where he set down beloved reels of classic Americana with The Band in 1967; popping into a café linked to Dylan in Santa Monica; driving past his estate in Malibu; peeking down the long driveway to his farm in Minnesota. We go to concerts by the dozens, and wait in lines all day so we can dash to the front of the stage. We bet on which songs he'll perform at the show tonight. (Kinney 1-2)

When Kinney speaks of those who listen too hard, he could have been saying those who read too hard, or those who see too hard; many kinds of people engage in such activities about artists, whatever the nature of their art, and try harder to understand the particular nuances of the works they enjoy; essentially, it is not different from Civil War buffs or stamp collectors: these are ways of relating to things one believes relevant for one's life. It is true not everyone is predisposed to going to such lengths for an artist, but if we think wandering through MacDougal Street to visit the house where Dylan lived is any different than standing at the door of the CBGB, visiting Gettysburg, taking pictures in front of the Salford Lads Club, stopping at 105 Newland Park, in Hull (questioning where hedgehogs might have been slayed), or going through Merrion Square to take pictures of a colorful statue, then we should think otherwise: this type of relationships happens constantly, and it only sounds strange for those who never participated in such kind of expeditions.

Along the way as a follower of the Dylan tour, Michelle Engert came by an incredible opportunity: to transcribe Dylan's red notebook where most lyrics from *Blood*

*on the Tracks* had been worked.<sup>83</sup> It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to deal with her idol's work; but many years after the month she spent transcribing Dylan's words, she would look back and feel strange at the job she thought was a heaven-sent opportunity:

Later, she would feel strange about the time she spent as an interloper in Dylan's private space. Michelle wondered whether people should be going into trash cans and hotel rooms and taking what Dylan left behind, and whether fans should legitimize that mischief by reading it, studying, copying it, publishing it. Dylan delivered a record; wasn't that enough for fans? Poking around in the scrap heap felt disrespectful. But at the time, Michelle had no misgivings about it. She was too enthralled. She was plunging into the record's creation with pages the author had kept in his pocket during those painful days in the summer of 1974. (Kinney 91-2)

What Michelle's regrets tells us about dealing with such private papers as Dylan's notebook is that our way of thinking is always being shaped by our present situations, and the assessment of an ethical behavior (or any kind of behavior) is dependent on our relation to what is of interest to us. One can grow out of Dylan-like infatuations but imagining one does not move on to similar relations with other things is to naively believe these relations are not part of one's life; it is part of who we are that one can justify our actions by pointing to similar relations as the ones described so far: each of these characters, whether still a Dylanologist or not, is distinguishable by the way he or she relates to Dylan. Dylan, believing he is scolding those lunatics who keep saying all those strange things about his life, and his music, says: "There's a whole world of scholars, professors, and Dylanologists, and everything I do affects them in some way. And, you know, in some ways, I've given them life. They'd be nowhere without me" (Kinney 231). Those Dylan is referring to when making this statement are the ones who keep an ongoing conversation about the singer; Dylan believes he is only referring to the lunatics but it is very hard, as I have been trying to put forward, to distinguish the sane from the insane: in that sense, and as the earlier example of Peter and Lucas' stories, or as in Patti Smith's rendition of Dylan's influence, or as in Greil Marcus' admission of being a writer because of Dylan, we all fall under Dylan's attack. To keep the conversation going about Dylan is, in a sense, to keep a conversation about ourselves; if we were merely here to be entertained, we would cease the conversation in order to dance.

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<sup>83</sup> The notebook had been bought by financier George Hecksher, and was part of a large collection of Dylan's manuscripts which he held in his possession.

## Afterword: *Mea Res Agitur*

Stating one's artistic preferences as a description of one's life entails the necessity of casting away reproaches regarding personal taste, as the expectation in such kind of conversation concerns the value of the subjects included in the category 'artistic'. As a resolution for the problem, Pierre Bourdieu would propose the foundation of a "science of taste and cultural consumption" which should abolish the "sacred frontier" separating "legitimate culture" from "lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment"; the goal of such science is to "discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable 'choices', such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle." The division, a consequence of Kantian philosophy (the distinction between "taste of sense" and "taste of reflection"), made the "sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures" one can obtain from art and high culture fall under the category of "pure pleasure," the "symbol of moral excellence and a measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human."<sup>84</sup> Apart from the sociological distinctions the separation between high (sacred) and low (profane) art embody, and which Bourdieu focus his attention on, Bourdieu's goal for a union between the two spheres aims, in part, at reinstating ordinariness in the definition of what a human being is, as it comes to pass that the truly human seems to be associated only with high art and culture. The conflation of art with life seems to imply that the more life there is in art, the less art there is in art: "Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life" (Bourdieu).<sup>85</sup> The position is not uncommon in several types of assessment of the reasons why we relate to certain types of art and not others; personal taste, by providing a seemingly irrefutable justification for our appreciation of what some might shun aside as lesser art, introduces relativity into our dealings with art and sets the balance off in such discussions.

There is a word in Bourdieu's descriptions of his project which is graphically detached from the others: 'choices'. The implication in singling out this word is a call of attention to the lack of freedom we choose the things we appreciate, since in Bourdieu's

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<sup>84</sup> In opposition to "pure pleasure," Bourdieu introduces the notion of "facile pleasure."

<sup>85</sup> All previous quotes taken from Pierre Bourdieu's introduction (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* xxiv-xxx).

view our choice is conditioned by many external factors. Morally speaking, one could claim to have no responsibility in most aspects of our lives by embracing such position; however, we are often, publicly and privately, called to assume responsibility for our actions and, while it is true our upbringing plays a decisive part in who we are, one must not disregard that responsibility for our choices is an acknowledgement of our personality. We might not play a part in the choice of where we are born, or where we spend our childhood, or what high school we attend, but our existence as human beings requires that, as part of the process of becoming an active member of the environment we inhabit, we assume our choices. Søren Kierkegaard, in *Either/Or*, notes: “The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 163). In this view, the question of choice is absolutely central to the definition of a human being; Bourdieu’s fear we may not be so free as we believe is recognition of that relevance.

In Kierkegaard’s formal organization of *Either/Or*, a work which in part articulates questions about the relevance of choice in human beings’ lives, the first part, a series of texts written by A, alludes to an aesthetic relation with life; in the second part, letters written by Judge Wilhelm (referred to as B) are addressed to A and build a defense of an ethical relation to life. We might infer the disjunction the title of the volume alludes to refers to the possibility of choosing between the first and the second part, but on closer look, nonetheless, the book is concerned exclusively with the problem of choice itself. What Kierkegaard puts in play are ways opposite ideas on the role of choice originate different ways of living. In an aesthetic life, choice is rejected as central since whatever we may choose, we will eventually regret it. A’s position is better synthesized by B when he says: “Do it, or do not do it—you will regret it either way” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 147); if choosing one thing or the other is unimportant, then choice is deemed irrelevant. B then goes on to formulate the relevance choice has in an ethical life:

Your choice is an esthetic choice, but an esthetic choice is no choice. On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical. Wherever in the stricter sense there is a question of an *Either/Or*, one can always be sure that the ethical has something to do with it. The only absolute *Either/Or* is the choice between good and evil, but this is also absolutely ethical. (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 166-7)

In B’s assessment of choice, the question is not to choose between either an aesthetic or an ethic life—choosing is always an ethical decision. Since all choosing concerns ethical



decisions, there is not even the case that an aesthetic relation to life is morally right or wrong, since any moral decision also concerns exclusively the ethical.

An implication of the two stages in life, which Kierkegaard's description puts forward, seems to be the idea that an ethical life would hold no relation with aesthetic values; but following B's description, an ethical life does not entail the annulment of the aesthetical but its transfiguration: "Here I now want to call to mind the definition of the ethical I gave before—that it is that whereby a person becomes what he becomes. It does not want to make the individual into someone else but into the individual himself; it does not want to destroy the aesthetic but to transfigure it" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 253). The transfiguration of the aesthetic is possible since "in choosing itself, the personality chooses itself ethically and absolutely excludes the esthetic; but since he nevertheless chooses himself and does not become another being by choosing himself but becomes himself, all the esthetic returns in its relativity" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 177). Kierkegaard recovers relativity, an inherent problem to the question of personal taste, as central to establish aesthetical concerns in an ethical life; relativity is not a problem for B's conception of the aesthetical for in an ethical life the personality is established by choosing and, in that manner, the relativistic nature of the aesthetical is subdued by the possibility of being accounted for ethically by the personality. At the point where both narrators address the beautiful, the accounts become irreconcilable: in an aesthetic life, the beautiful contains its own teleology and is related to the singular, which makes it absolute (it is unique and self-explaining); in an ethical life, the beautiful is in relation with the particular and so cannot contain its own teleology. This being so, there is a central incompatibility: in A, the sensuous experience is absolute and thus the universal is contained within it (experiences are independent of each other), while in B the universal is constituted by the particulars and thus subdues them (experiences are always related between them). From this incompatibility one can extract the essential distinction between the positions: for A, as the object contains its own teleology, the ethical is a criterion which cannot bear relevance in the analysis of an object for it is external to that object; as objects contain their own teleology, a relation with an artistic object depends on its immediacy (the sensuous experience). For B, due to the relativistic nature of the aesthetic, a relation with an artistic object is not exactly a relation with life but with a representation of life: "As far as poetry and art are concerned, may I remind you of what I mentioned earlier, that they provide only an imperfect reconciliation with life, also that when you fix your eye upon poetry and art you are not looking at actuality, and that is

what we really should be speaking about” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 273). This disclaimer on artistic objects is set to exclude the idea life consists exclusively of such kind of experiences, particularly since these experiences are not in actuality (artistic objects do not exist in actuality as they are the product of a thought process, a mediation). An ethical relation to an artistic object must acknowledge that one is not relating to life in its actuality but, at best, to a rendition of life.

While seemingly irreconcilable, both of Kierkegaard’s life stages share an essential feature: a condemnation of Hegel’s philosophy; not just of Hegel’s philosophy, but mostly of Hegelian philosophy (particularly its Danish strain). The condemnation is aimed not directly at Hegel’s philosophic system but mainly at the position which follows from such a system, that is, the implicit detachment from ordinary life. In Kierkegaard’s versions of our relation to life, whether aesthetical or ethical, the individual is always in close proximity with the experiences which make up his life and with the objects of his analysis. Kierkegaard’s reading of Hegelian philosophy as a system from which one can retract from life and still pass judgments on it is refuted by both accounts; so A states: “Every individual, however original he is, is still a child of God, of his age, of his nation, of his family, of his friends, and only in them does he have his truth” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I* 143); while B declares: “If one believes that at some moment a person can keep his personality completely blank and bare or that in the strictest sense one can halt and discontinue personal life, one certainly is mistaken” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 164). What is detrimental in Hegel is that philosophy remains external to life, as something outside the scope of actuality, falling only under the span of history, of the past.<sup>86</sup> Actuality is absolutely central in one’s assessment of life—it is something one cannot be freed from. Philosophy as an abstract project, strictly rationalistic, is thus unsound for Kierkegaard, either in an aesthetical or in an ethical life: there is nothing to say about life if one stands on the margin of that life. In Kierkegaard’s view, philosophy is not built out of historical concerns but rather stems from dealing with everything which constitutes our life, from the several relations we establish with our environment, whether with other people, institutions or objects (no matter the nature of those relationships). Those who refrain from looking at one’s own life must refrain from commenting on life altogether.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> “So it is also with the philosopher. He is outside; he is not a participant. He sits and grows old listening to the songs of the past; he has an ear for the harmonies of mediation. I respect scholarship, and I honor its devotees, but life, too, has its demands” (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 170-1).

<sup>87</sup> “This accounts for the repugnant spectacle that belongs to the order of the day in our age—to see young people who are able to mediate Christianity and paganism, who are able to play games with the titanic

Kierkegaard's attack on Hegelian philosophy is also a confrontation with the specialist. On this account we must acknowledge a second point of proximity between both life stages when each narrator assumes himself as "layman." A assumes this position before he accounts for his study of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*: "And even though I feel that music is an art that requires considerable experience if one is really to have an opinion on it, I comfort myself again as so often before with the paradox that also in presentiment and ignorance one can have a kind of experience" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or I* 166). A is trying to protect the idea one does not have to be an expert, a musician, say, to have a musical experience; but his proposition goes further when he assumes it is possible to think and write coherently about such experiences beyond detailed historic descriptions of the object under scrutiny. What Hegelian philosophy seems to remove from our relation to art is the immediate, its consequences and impact on our life. One should note a relation to art is not essentially any different from other types of relations in the sense all these relations and activities are a constituent of life: one can be talking about an opera, a play, a book, a philosophic concept, the idea of love, or just the smile of a girl.

B's assertion of being a layman is even more distressing: as a judge, discussing ethical issues seems to imply a level of specialization most human beings cannot rise to; nevertheless, he describes himself as witness instead of judge:

Consider what I have written as a trifle; consider it as notes to Balle's catechism—it does not matter—yet it has an authority that I hope you will respect. Or does it perhaps seem to you that I have illegitimately arrogated such authority to myself, that I have improperly introduced my public position into this private dispute, have behaved like a judge and not as a litigant? I readily abandon every claim; I am not even a litigant in opposition to you, for although I willingly admit that esthetics would gladly give you power of attorney to represent it, I am far from daring to credit myself with enough significance to represent ethics with full power of attorney. If I am anything at all, I am nothing more than a witness, and it is only in this sense that I thought this letter had a certain authority, because the words of one who speaks about what he has experienced always have authority. I am only a witness, and you have my deposition *in optima forma* [in perfectly correct form]. (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 323)

B's concern is that his authority might be ascertained to his position as judge; in that sense, authority would derive from levels of specialization and for Kierkegaard that would be unreasonable. Just as in A's relations to artistic objects, any mediation consists in a removal of those objects from life—a specialist is someone who mediates. The stress put on experience seems close to the relevance given to it in the aesthetical life, but experience here is merely a surrogate for the act of being alive. What B is trying to

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forces of history, and who are unable to tell a simple human being what he has to do here in life, nor do they know what they themselves have to do" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 171).

explain is the individual's authority develops from witnessing his own life as the sum of several types of experiences and not from a collection of singular experiences; the ethical individual acquires his authority from the ability to understand life in its wholeness. The ethical universals the personality must conform to in an ethical life seem similar to the external constrictions Bourdieu identified when he singled out the word 'choices'; but Kierkegaard refuses to accept those ethical universals as constraining, and, by stressing choosing is essential to developing personality, he is not removing our freedom of choice but assuming that an ethical individual always knows to choose according to his personality. By stressing the influence of personality, Kierkegaard accomplishes two things simultaneously: for one, by removing the external pressures as essential to our behavior, he ascertains the "truly human" is not defined by the standards of moral excellence attributed to high art (or any type of art); secondly, he offers a theory accounting for what might otherwise seem "incommensurable choices."

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud relates how he once dreamt about a physician friend being attacked in an essay by Goethe; part of the dream consists of Freud trying to demonstrate there was a chronological issue making it impossible for Goethe to have been able to slander his friend's work (at the time of Goethe's death, Freud dreams, his friend could not have been more than eighteen years old). Since Freud's proposition is that all dreams are essentially egotistical, Freud then goes on to explain how the dream was prompted by anxieties over his own revolutionary work: he superimposes his image with his friend's image and explains how the dream is actually about his own fear of being criticized by his peers. Analyzing the several materials from the dream, Freud explains the essay his friend is slandered in is "On Nature,"<sup>88</sup> a work about the natural sciences; when Freud tries to gather from his memory the real life events which provided the materials for the dream he remembers why Goethe's essay is relevant to him: "I am reminded vigorously that 'mea res agitur' [this concerns me] by the reference to Goethe's incomparably beautiful little essay, for it was hearing this essay read at a popular lecture that decided me, when I was still an unsettled school-leaver, to study the natural sciences" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 282).<sup>89</sup> It is Goethe's essay on nature which leads Freud to the study of the natural sciences; but Goethe's relevance as a literary

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<sup>88</sup> In an explanatory note to her translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Joyce Crick notes that the essay "On Nature," long attributed to Goethe, was actually written by G. C. Tobbler after a series of conversations with Goethe about natural science and natural theology (published in the Winter of 1782-3); in another note, Crick remarks the expression Freud uses in connection to the essay, "Nature, Nature," actually occurs in another essay, that one written by Goethe: "On Shakespeare's Birthday" (originally presented in 1771 but only published in 1773).

<sup>89</sup> The description and analysis of the dream on pages 280-2.

figure is also an intrinsic part of Freud's life, and it is no wonder then that literature plays such a relevant part in Freud's work.<sup>90</sup> This is why it cannot be a coincidence that, after the technical survey in the first part of the *Interpretation*, one is constantly finding references to Goethe's work, mainly to *Dr. Faust*; through this literary connection, one can understand the abundance of other literary references—German poets, Shakespeare, or Greek tragedies being constantly present in Freud's work. Thus, the Latin expression *mea res agitur* can be used in two ways: first, as the formulation of an internal process for choosing in which one recognizes in the external world something relating to one's own self; secondly, as an external justification through which one can explain one's choices to other human beings. Our relation to certain objects falls under the description provided by Freud's *mea res agitur*, in the sense we understand some choices as absolutely crucial to the formation of our personality; but not all choices are, nonetheless, of this magnitude, and we must not forget Kierkegaard's note: "even in matters that in and by themselves are innocent, what a person chooses is always important" (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 157). In that sense, any attention exerted towards objects in which we discern something relatable to us is a natural extension of our personality and should be accepted as crucial for understanding said personality.

The significance being given to personality seems to validate the relativistic position on our relationship to artistic objects, asserting that something having relevance to us is immediately artistically pertinent: how else could we validate ourselves if not by entitling our tastes with artistic relevance? Stanley Cavell, discussing Tolstoy's project in *What Is Art?*, claims there is sanity in the Russian's procedure of reorganizing the Western Canon by acknowledging his method "confronts the fact that we often do not find, and have never found, works we would include in a canon of works of art to be of importance or relevance to us"; Cavell notes the implication is that without a canon we cannot verify if the works which are relevant to us "are art, or what makes them art" (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 193). How can we testify there are pieces of art which are relevant for us if they are not in a canon? Tolstoy's sanity lies in recognizing the relevance of art cannot be established by a canon.

But why is it, then, we need to tell other people how we feel about a certain artistic object? Why does it matter we explain to others the reasons why we appreciate certain things? For one, as it was seen, because it validates our personality and, by extent,

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<sup>90</sup> Probably it is not a coincidence Freud might have mixed up the references to where the expression "Nature, Nature" occurs; it would be an interesting lapse if he was actually thinking about the essay on Shakespeare.

our humanity; but Cavell also claims “the knowledge, unshared, is a burden—not, perhaps, the way having a secret can be a burden, or being misunderstood; a little more like the way, perhaps, not being believed is a burden, or not being trusted. It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 192-3). Cavell’s argument exposes a discrepancy between relating tastes and explaining what I know of particular objects; but one must not open such a scission: the difference is merely one between listing items and explaining those items. We explain our feelings about a work of art by discussing the subject, by pointing to and explaining particular aspects, by conveying its tone; sometimes we fail, but sometimes we are able to illuminate a work in a manner others understand—it all depends on our skills at conversation. Cavell acknowledges how it is difficult to be proficient in such matters: “describing one’s experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it. Art is often praised because it brings men together. But it also separates them” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 193). The anguish shared with the artist is the possibility of being misunderstood as human beings; that is why it is so relevant others know the same as we about the objects we deem relevant to us and that is why we invest so much in our conversations about these things: if others understand, our personality (our choices) is validated. It is not innocent, then, that Kierkegaard uses the expression: *Loquere, ut videam te* [Speak, in order that I may see you] (Kierkegaard, *Either/Or II* 275). The expression, attributed to Socrates by Erasmus,<sup>91</sup> illuminates Cavell’s argument about conversations: we exist through the conversations we keep with those who inhabit our environment. And if those describing art share the artist’s burden, and his responsibilities,<sup>92</sup> then those describing art also share the faith of the artist: “the giving up of audience must present itself, both to the theologian and to the artist, as death.” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 151).

A consequence of such position is that in order to please certain audiences, so that they do not desert us, we are sometimes tempted to embellish our tastes beyond their real worth, or to diminish their actual value in order to avoid embarrassing moments:

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<sup>91</sup> Howard and Edna Hong clarify the reference in a footnote to their translation of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or II*.

<sup>92</sup> “The artist is responsible for everything that happens in his work—and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is meant. It is a terrible responsibility; very few men have the gift and the patience and the singleness to shoulder it. But it is all the more terrible, when it is shouldered, not to appreciate it, to refuse to understand something meant so well.” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 236-7).

Who has never endowed a pop tune with Proustian power of recall and summary; or straightened out an awkward moment with a piece of pop seriousness (“Of course it’s not just physical; I respect you as a person”); or thrilled when, at Saturday matinees, the tight-faced soldier nudges the door open with one hand and in the other holds a sub-machine gun upright in world-preserving coolness? If these fantasies are worthless, we are worthless. (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 134-5)

As a direct result of having no audience comes the acute pain of recognizing our worthlessness, since that recognition is also a suppression of our personality. That is why the best conversations are usually kept in circles of close friends, where our trustworthiness does not need to be constantly proved and our personality can be displayed fully (in such environments, listing items might be enough to explain certain things). Our ability to recognize the relevance of apparently minor objects for our personality (our ability, were we fluent in Latin, to use the expression *mea res agitur*), requires us to continually practice our conversational skills; to do so, one keeps establishing relationships with other human beings, whether personally or through their work. These relationships, as Cavell puts it, form a world:

But any relationship of absorbing importance will form a world, as the personality does. And a critical change in either will change the world. The world of the happy man is different from the world of the unhappy man, says Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. And the world of the child is different from the world of the grown-up, and that of the sick from that of the well, and the mad from the un-mad. This is why a profound change of consciousness presents itself as a revelation, why it is so difficult, why its anticipation will seem the destruction of the world: even where it is a happy change, a world is always lost. (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 118)

This is the reason for some of the violent reactions people hold when artists, for instance, make sudden stylistic changes in their works: it is not just a matter of treason, it is matter of destroying a world. Establishing psychotic relationships with artists is an instance of this, but we do not need artists to hold such relationships: family, mistresses, friends (imaginary or not), cars, or haircuts are all at the same level: they are part of our conversations and as so an intrinsic part of our lives. Richard Rorty, reminiscing on his life, regrets not having paid more attention to poems he once deemed irrelevant:

However that may be, I now wish that I had spent somewhat more of my life with verse. This is not because I fear having missed out on truths that are incapable of statement in prose. There are no such truths; there is nothing about death that Swinburne and Landor knew but Epicurus and Heidegger failed to grasp. Rather, it is because I would have lived more fully if I had been able to rattle off more old chestnuts—just as I would have if I had made more close friends. Cultures with richer vocabularies are more fully human—farther removed from the beasts—than those with poorer ones; individual men and women are more fully human when their memories are amply stocked with verses. (Rorty)

Rorty uses the expression “old chestnuts” referring to poems learnt during our lifetime and so worn out we often forget them or just neglect to take them seriously, supposing them to be trifle or useless. Rattling more “old chestnuts” is then not just a way of saying more poetry equals more vocabulary: for one, it is a way of recapturing our own existence and the ways we have come to be who we are; on the other hand, the possibility of throwing some of those poems into the conversation would allow longer and better conversations and thus a fuller life (incidentally, more and better conversations are a way into closer friendships). Human beings “want signs, miracles, some cure for being on earth, some way of getting over being human. Maybe that’s just human; and there’s no cure for that” (Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 145). Art does not give the answers, it holds no signs or miracles, and it is not a cure (it does not make us better or worse human beings). In that sense, life is a disease the only definite cure for would be death; but as hypochondriacs, we are not interested in definitive cures, we just revel in discussing symptoms, in imagining therapies and treatments, in recommending a certain physician who holds a hope for cure.



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