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**Faith, Selfhood and the Blues in the Lyrics  
of Nick Cave**

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**INTRODUCTION**

And I only am escaped to tell thee.

So runs the epigraph, taken from the Biblical book of Job, to the Australian songwriter Nick Cave's collected lyrics.<sup>1</sup> Using such a quotation invites anyone who listens to Cave's songs to see them as instructive addresses, a feeling compounded by an on-record intensity matched by few in the history of popular music. From his earliest work in the late 1970s with his bands The Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party up to his most recent releases with long-time collaborators The Bad Seeds, it appears that he is intent on spreading some sort of message.

This essay charts how Cave's songs, which as Robert Eaglestone notes take religion as 'a primary discourse that structures and shapes others',<sup>2</sup> consistently use the blues as a platform from which to deliver his dispatches. The first chapter draws particularly on recent writing by Andrew Warnes and Adam Gussow to elucidate why Cave's earlier songs have the blues and his Christian faith dovetailing so frequently. Though Gussow deals mainly with the blues of the Depression-era American South, and Warnes with its structural impact on British rather than Australian rock music, the tropes that they identify are ultimately applicable 'wherever [the blues] becomes felt'<sup>3</sup> and Cave draws upon them frequently.

Chapter two examines a major rhetorical change in Cave's work. While many of his lyrics of the 1980s and 1990s sound as if they are being sung with a Bible in hand, the new century sees the modern age stream into his songwriting. With particular focus on his 2004

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<sup>1</sup> *The Complete Lyrics 1978-2013* (London: Penguin, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> 'From Mutiny to Calling upon the Author: Cave's Religion', in *Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave*, edited by Tanya Dalziell and Karen Welberry (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 139-151 (pp. 142)

<sup>3</sup> 'The Feeling of a Heartless World: Blues Rhythm, Oppositionality and British Rock Music', in *Consuming and Creating Southern Culture*, edited by Martyn Bone and Brian Ward (Gainesville, FA: University of Florida Press, 2014), pp. 311-337 (p. 322)

record *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*, it incorporates J. M. Coetzee's writing on abattoirs as well as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to unpick Cave's new lyrical preoccupations with genocide and modernity. Though these writers may on the surface appear uneasy bedfellows, certain shared concerns – an emphasis on maintaining one's individual agency, their interest in the 'new kind of barbarism'<sup>4</sup> that proliferates in the industrially advanced Twentieth Century, and worries about the barely perceptible moral pollutions of everyday life – link them in intriguing and productive ways. The theoretical groundwork laid, the third chapter takes Cave's 2013 song 'Higgs Boson Blues' as a springboard for examining if Cave can still emulate Jesus in a world swamped by reasoned thought, before the essay zooms out to show how the instincts of the blues are grafted onto his love songs.

Though the lyrics that appear in the body of the essay are reproduced from the Penguin book, the reader is urged to take the LP recordings as their primary referents due to the use of harmonic theory and examinations of Cave's vocal performances in the analyses. When a song is first discussed in the argument, both the page numbers of the written lyric and the album on which the track appears are given in the footnotes.

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<sup>4</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso Books, 1997), p. xi

**ONE****‘I WENT ON DOWN THE ROAD’: CAVE AND THE HOLY BLUES**

[Sarath:] ‘A man who is a *makamkruka* is a churner, an agitator. Someone who perhaps sees things more truly by turning everything upside down. He’s a devil almost, a *yaksa*. Though a *makamkruka*, strangely, guards the sacred spot in a temple ground.’<sup>5</sup>

**Michael Ondaatje**

References to the black and white blues traditions appear frequently in Cave’s work of the 1980s and early 1990s. Initial signifiers are straightforward: songs like ‘Blind Lemon Jefferson’ (1985) and ‘Up Jumped the Devil’ (1988)<sup>6</sup> allude to the famous Texas bluesman Jefferson and Robert Johnson’s 1936 recording ‘Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil)’ respectively. A great majority the songs written at this time take place in a landscape pitched between Flannery O’Connor’s Gothic South<sup>7</sup> and the fantastical Mississippi Delta of Johnson, where the wide vistas backlight tales of moral transgression and reprisal.

As observed by Wiseman-Trowse, ‘the *myth* of Elvis [Presley ... and] the identification of Elvis with Jesus [that] has been a secret theme of the Elvis story since 1956’<sup>8</sup> is one of Cave’s primary fascinations throughout the period. Initially caricatured in his first band The Birthday Party’s 1982 song ‘Big-Jesus-Trash-Can’, the mythological Elvis is

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<sup>5</sup> *Anil’s Ghost* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p. 165

<sup>6</sup> ‘Blind Lemon Jefferson’ on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *The Firstborn is Dead*, LP (Mute Records, 1985). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. ‘Up Jumped the Devil’ on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *Tender Prey*, LP (Mute Records, 1988). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 117-118 and 141-143 respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Nathan Wiseman-Trowse details the influence of O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* on Cave’s writing, particularly in relation to his novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (London: Penguin, 1989). See ‘Oedipus Wrecks: Cave and the Presley Myth’, in Dalziell and Welberry pp. 153-165 (p. 164)

<sup>8</sup> pp. 153, 155

particularly prominent on Cave's second album with The Bad Seeds, 1985's *The Firstborn is Dead*. While the title of the record references Presley's stillborn twin brother, the opening track 'Tupelo' figures the 1936 Tupelo-Gainsborough tornado survived by the one-year-old Elvis as a scene of apocalyptic resurrection:

Distant thunder rumble

Rumble like the Beast

The Beast it cometh, cometh down [...]

[...] the King is born in Tupelo!<sup>9</sup>

The narratorial voice is a withdrawn yet forceful first-person, one in which an 'I' does not appear but makes its presence felt by sheer force of rhetoric. Harnessing a ham-Southern twang and Biblical dialectic ('cometh'), the narrator veers between instruction ('Looka yonder!'), declaration ('the King is born in Tupelo!') and reproach ('Ya can tell yaself ya dreaming buddy | But no sleep runs this deep'). As if preaching fire-and-brimstone style to a congregation, the song is exemplary of Cave speaking on behalf of the 'despotic God' which he claims to have obsessed him in the early stages of his career. He notes in his 1996 lecture 'The Flesh Made Word' that:

[A]ll I had to do [in my early career] was walk onstage and open my mouth and let the curse of God roar through me [...] I just pointed a damning finger and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 101-103.

<sup>10</sup> In *Two Lectures By Nick Cave*, LP, (Mute Records, 2000). Another example of Cave's rock-and-roll preacher persona is 1988 track 'City of Refuge'. Echoing Johnson's infamous 'Cross Road Blues' ('I believe to my soul now, poor Bob is sinkin' down | You can run, you can run, tell my friend Willie Brown'), the link between blues history and apocalyptic judgement is made as strongly as in 'Tupelo':

As Wiseman-Trowse notes, ‘Tupelo’ is indebted to John Lee Hooker’s ‘Tupelo Blues’ which similarly transforms the 1936 tornado into an act of divine judgement.<sup>11</sup> The groundwork laid, Cave conflates the scene with Presley’s birth. Along with the messianic overtures of Cave’s description of Presley, one notes strong overtones of W. B. Yeats’s classic forecast of uncertain modernity ‘The Second Coming’. Yeats’s ‘widening gyre’ and ‘blood-dimmed tide’<sup>12</sup> find a parallel in the storm and its ‘big black cloud’. Furthermore, the ‘Beast’ soon revealed as Presley is a verbatim reference to Yeats’s ‘rough beast’<sup>13</sup> of the resurrection.

However, Cave’s vision differs in that his second coming remains steeped in an unshakeable adherence to God’s message. Where Yeats’s image of the falcon estranged from its master’s call is often seen to represent ‘present civilisation [...] becoming out of touch with Christ’,<sup>14</sup> Cave is concerned with spooking the world back onto the Christian path. The feeling of being answerable only to God is what gives the lyric such force and certainty – while ‘The Second Coming’ ends only with the pregnantly rhetorical question of what the ‘mere anarchy’<sup>15</sup> has ushered in, ‘Tupelo’ concludes by detailing what to expect should the townsfolk not find a way out of their ‘sleep’:

#### The King will walk on Tupelo [...]

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You better run to the City of Refuge [...]  
[...] You stand before your maker  
In a state of shame [...]  
[...] The gutters will run with blood [...]  
[...] the grave will spew you out

‘City of Refuge’ on *Tender Prey*, and in *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 150-151. ‘Cross Road Blues’ on Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings*, LP (Columbia Records, 1990). Reprinted by permission of Columbia Records Ltd.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Oedipus Wrecks...’ p. 165

<sup>12</sup> In *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: MacMillan, 1981), pp. 210-211 (ll. 2, 5)

<sup>13</sup> l. 21

<sup>14</sup> See Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: MacMillan, 1984), pp. 201-205

<sup>15</sup> l. 4

[...] Hey Tupelo!

You will reap just what you sow

Though the statement's ultimate meaning remains elusive, the intimation is clearly of the reassertion of God's presence and justice rather than a return to Yeats's contemporary 'darkness'.<sup>16</sup> While 'The Second Coming' figures the beast as representative of a new global barbarism – a prediction borne out tenfold in the horrors of the concentration camps, nuclear warfare and fascist dictatorships – Cave twists Yeats's passive horror at a sinful modern world into an active voice. In the realm of the blues now made holy by the Christ-Presley amalgamation, we see Cave intent on wresting humanity back out of its sinful state.

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If, as Simon Frith puts forward, it is words which 'give songs their social use',<sup>17</sup> then Cave consistent usage of the vernacular and geography of a quasi-Biblical American South becomes more than mere performative bluster. With this decision he presents himself as a follower of the messianic Presley, a blues-prophet using the rock song to spread God's message. Cave does not write lyrics simply because this is his only available means of expression, as evidenced by two novels,<sup>18</sup> the prose of the *King Ink* collections<sup>19</sup> and a screenplay for John Hillcoat's 2005 film *The Proposition*.<sup>20</sup> It is the possibility of *delivery* which spurs him to combine his words with music – 'delivery' meaning not just the

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<sup>16</sup> l. 18

<sup>17</sup> 'Why do songs have words?' in *Contemporary Music Review*, 5 (1989), pp. 77-96 (p. 93)

<sup>18</sup> *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and *The Death of Bunny Munro* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2009)

<sup>19</sup> London: Black Spring Press, 1988

<sup>20</sup> First Look Pictures

expressive possibilities of the sung lyric but also the guidance of God which will, in the words of Jesus now passing through Cave, ‘deliver us from evil’.<sup>21</sup>

Cave’s attraction to Christ stems as much from his counter-cultural example as his wise words. In both ‘The Flesh Made Word’ and his essay on *The Gospel According to Mark* Cave portrays Jesus as an outsider figure attempting to liberate man’s creative spirit from a society intent on confining it. Cave’s Christ was ‘in deep conflict with the world’ and harboured a ‘boiling anger’ towards it,<sup>22</sup> his struggle raged against the ‘established order of things, symbolized by the scribes and Pharisees [... who Christ saw as] enemies of the imagination’. Christ’s message was that ‘the creative imagination has the power to combat all enemies’, one that demonstrates how ‘[d]ivinity must be given its freedom to flow through us, through language, through communication, through imagination’. Man’s ‘spiritual duty’<sup>23</sup> of creation and communion with God has no need to conform to societal expectation. Indeed, why would one want to, when a figure whose example ‘gave our imaginations the freedom to fly [... and] to be Christ-like’ ended up ‘the victim of humanity’s lack of imagination [...] hammered to the cross with nails of creative vapidty’?<sup>24</sup>

When Cave searches for a contemporary framework with which to deliver His message, it is no surprise that he opts for the blues. This is not simply due to the ready-made Jesus-Presley angle, but also stems from the aforementioned evocations of the early Twentieth-Century American south. Adam Gussow posits that many of the transgressive narratives of singers like Jefferson were a mode for dispossessed blacks ‘articulat[ing] their somebodiness, insist[ing] on their indelible individuality’.<sup>25</sup> Before a white ruling class which regarded them as an undifferentiated mass of black sub-citizens, the ‘intimate violence’ of

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Lord’s Prayer’, Matthew 6:9-13, in *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with the Apocrypha: King James Version*, edited by David Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 1554

<sup>22</sup> Introduction to *The Gospel According to Mark* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998), pp. 2, 3

<sup>23</sup> All ‘The Flesh Made Word’

<sup>24</sup> ... *Mark* p. 3

<sup>25</sup> *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), p. 5



‘both real “cutting and shooting” and symbolic mayhem threatened and celebrated in song’<sup>26</sup> gave a degree of agency back to both the individual and his black community.

In light of the global impact of the blues on rock music, Andrew Warnes broadens the definition:

[T]he blues are composed not just of dyadic apostrophes and twelve bar structures [...] they instead refer to a full-blown structure of feeling that is grounded in a notion of *redemptive oppositionality* [emphasis added] sourced and reworked from the black southern experience.<sup>27</sup>

Warnes notes that the oppositional aesthetic of the blues arose against a ruling class ‘more attached than other social groups in the modern United States and Europe to aristocratic ideas of civilization’. As such, wherever it is evoked, the blues and its ‘epistemological imperatives’ of oppositional individuality ‘continues to contest the Eurocentric or “civilized” culture it once opposed on southern grounds’.<sup>28</sup>

A link is traceable between the Southern aristocrats intent on denying black individuality and the ‘scribes and Pharisees’ whose ‘dull rationalism’<sup>29</sup> so angers Cave’s creative Christ. The blues, with its insistence on self-worth and creative energy, allows Cave to imitate his Jesus who breaks free from the shackles of those ‘enemies of the imagination’. Its vision of a ‘democratic and universal culture’<sup>30</sup> is one of which Cave’s Christ, a figure who ‘abhorred the concept of a spiritual elite [and] spoke to every man’,<sup>31</sup> would undoubtedly have approved. In His image, Cave’s lyrics present a compulsion to act beyond

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<sup>26</sup> pp. 4-5

<sup>27</sup> p. 330

<sup>28</sup> pp. 321, 322

<sup>29</sup> ... *Mark* p. 3

<sup>30</sup> Warnes p. 322

<sup>31</sup> ‘The Flesh Made Word’

the bounds of social and religious convention so that one becomes more like Jesus than the scribe, and more like the bluesman than the aristocrat.

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1991's 'Papa Won't Leave You, Henry' is a sustained performance of what one might term Cave's blues-prophecy. With the vocal delivery just as forthright as on 'Tupelo', Cave's narrator Henry finds himself 'out walking'<sup>32</sup> in another heated O'Connor-Johnson landscape. Gussow's intimate violence lurks in the background, Henry detailing a night of 'screams and groans' spent 'amongst [the] bones' of an unnamed woman.

The verse moves quickly between setting up Henry's societal liminality and marrying this with the same divine inspiration that courses through the 1985 song. He dismisses organised religion in the same way that Christ chastises the Pharisees, scorning the activity in the 'mission house':

Where that mad old buzzard, the Reverend,  
Shrieked and flapped about life after you're dead  
Well, I thought about my friend, Michel  
How they rolled him in linoleum  
And shot him in the neck<sup>33</sup>

The thought of Michel comes from the Reverend's activity, entwining the actions of this modern-day scribe with the murder of Henry's friend. Furthermore, the culprit is only

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<sup>32</sup> On Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *Henry's Dream*, LP (Mute Records, 1991). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 187-191.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that Cave has generally been less than enthusiastic about organised religion. In the *Mark* introduction he calls the Anglican church 'the decaf of worship' (p. 1), and speaks disapprovingly of Christ's 'constant taunting [by] the church officials'. (p. 3)

identified as a vague ‘they’, setting up from the beginning an ‘us-versus-them’ situation in keeping with both Warnes’s oppositionality and Christ’s railing against ‘the established order’. Enraged by Michel’s death, Henry ‘bellow[s] at the firmament’ in disgust. This act mimics the ‘essential humanness’<sup>34</sup> of Christ that Cave finds so appealing. In raising his voice to the heavens, he echoes the words of Jesus on the cross as they appear in Mark’s gospel, a mixture of holy devotion and human suffering: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’<sup>35</sup>

An answer comes via the falling rain ‘here to stay’, a phrase ringing with the same note of portent carried by the storm in ‘Tupelo’. The effect of the rain here is even more intimate, acting as a direct response from God to Henry:

[...] the rain is here to stay  
And the rain pissed down upon me  
And washed me all away  
Saying  
Papa won’t leave you, Henry  
Papa won’t leave you, Boy

Here Cave utilises the expressive potential of the sung lyric. The rumble of coming change is heightened by the musical backing, for while the song has previously sat on the tonic F minor chord, the band moves to C major when Cave sings ‘stay’, drawing it out for several bars. With C the fifth degree of the F minor scale, a feeling of imbalance is created which the listener expects to hear resolved by a perfect cadence returning to F minor. When this occurs, Cave simultaneously outlines a further *spiritual* cadence between Henry and God, figured

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<sup>34</sup> ... *Mark* p. 3

<sup>35</sup> Mark 15:34, in *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible...* p. 1613

here as the more colloquial form of ‘Father’ that is ‘Papa’. At the resolution, the syllables ‘wash[?]d-me-all-a-way’ are delivered on descending degrees of the scale, a 5-4-3-2-1 falling from the C to land on F. Not only does this musically represent the falling rain, but it also translates the metaphorical movement of God’s message down from the heavens into Henry. The unity is strengthened by the capitalisation of ‘Boy’ in the written lyric, aping the common Christian practise of capitalising the names of holy figures from God the Father down to the ‘King’ and ‘Beast’ of ‘Tupelo’.

The rain speaks on God’s behalf (‘Saying’), both comforting Henry in his distress and reminding him of a certain selfless aspect to his mission. In order that God might imbue him with the power to imitate Christ, he must first allow the Holy Spirit to enter him completely, ‘wash[ing ...] away’ the man so that all he need do is ‘[point] a damning finger’. Unsurprisingly, Henry’s task conflates symbolism from both the Christian and blues traditions:

[...] the road is long  
And the road is hard  
And many fall by the side  
But Papa won’t leave you, Henry  
So there ain’t no need to cry<sup>36</sup>

Cave pertinently chooses to figure this quest, both spiritual and actual, as a journey down a ‘road’. He thus echoes the well-worn blues mythology of travelling along a road to reach a loved one or to find work in one of the cities along the ‘blues highway’, the American Route

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<sup>36</sup> Note here the capitalisation of ‘Papa’ in the written edition despite it not falling at the beginning of the line, confirming it as a rendering of God the Father.

61 stretching from New Orleans to Minnesota and taking in Johnson's Delta and Presley's Memphis.<sup>37</sup>

As in 'Tupelo', '... Henry' sees Cave adopting the dialectic of the Southern bluesman. However, here he imbues not only his protagonist but also the Lord with this tongue. With intimacy between the two already established by the child's slang of 'Papa', God rounds off the communiqué by telling Henry 'there *ain't no* need to cry [emphasis added]'. Speaking to him in his own vernacular, God's tongue becomes that of both the blues's 'democratic and universal culture' and the Christ who 'spoke to every man'. A passage from Warnes ties Cave's linguistic choice once more into blues oppositionality:

A tendency [among aristocratic whites] to talk about music in the most spiritual terms possible often accompanied this anxious investment in civilization. *Pure, exquisite, divine, serious*: such breathless adjectives, applied in reference to Mozart and Beethoven and precious few others, often led to a negative comparison with another music, with the Ma Raineys and Big Bill Broonzy's of the world, whose work appeared to oppose such qualities.<sup>38</sup>

God speaking here in the accent of a 'Big Bill Broonzy' reclaims the 'divin[ity]' of music for the culture of the everyman. The chorus concludes with a call-and-response between Cave and band of the phrase 'I went on down the road', acting as both a commitment to deliver God's message and an allusion to the plantation songs which Warnes notes as a cornerstone of the dialectical and aesthetical rebellion of the blues.<sup>39</sup> His bond with the Lord only

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<sup>37</sup> The intermingling of prophesying and the road's mythology with is not unique to '... Henry'. The aforementioned 'Blind Lemon Jefferson' figures Jefferson's own 'road' as 'dark and lonely [...] and holy'.

<sup>38</sup> p. 321

<sup>39</sup> '[T]he constant operation of this oppositional aesthetic confirms that the blues belong to that older and larger black cultural paradigm that grew out of the peculiar mix of isolation and interdependence that first took hold in plantation slavery.' p. 317

growing in strength, Henry makes his journey with the spirit of blues individualism and God's message raging inside of him.

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This early period of Cave's work with The Bad Seeds sees him identify the blues as the optimum framework for emulating his counter-cultural Christ. Pushing on from some of the embryo-mythologies of rock history, Cave's narrators extricate themselves from society while simultaneously chastising it for its weaknesses. However, questions remain – for while Jesus delivers from sin, and Cave's lyrics groan under the weight of that deliverance, the exact nature of the transgression they rail against is vague. It is only with the turn of the century and a studied lyrical expansion upon the preacher-stylings of 'Tupelo' that the object at which his 'damning finger' points is identified.

**TWO****'I GOT THE ABATTOIR BLUES': CAVE AND THE CONTEMPORARY**

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural.<sup>40</sup>

**Flannery O'Connor**

Cave's 2004 double-album *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus* is by no means his first record to deal with murder. In fact, the bloody frenzies which characterise *Tender Prey* or *Murder Ballads* (body count: sixty-five) are conspicuous by their absence, for Cave now trades intimate violence for death and destruction on a much larger scale. Though visions of apocalypse are of course present in the early work, the album's primary innovation is to shift from the lyric I's prophesying of divine judgement to presenting Cave with exhibitions of corpses. 'Messiah Ward' details a 'strange day' in which Cave and a lover see a long line of the dead paraded before them; 'Nature Boy' finds the narrator 'watch[ing] the news on TV' as a child to find only reports of 'ordinary slaughter' and 'routine atrocity'; and *The Lyre of Orpheus* concludes with Cave repenting to a group of children for the sins of his generation and offering them '[t]he keys to the gulag'.<sup>41</sup>

'TV' and 'gulag' are the words of note here. These are resoundingly modern terms, coined in the Twentieth Century and out of keeping with Cave's previous linguistic choices.

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in J. R. C. Cousland, 'God, the Bad, and the Ugly: The *Vi(t)a Negativa* of Nick Cave and P. J. Harvey', in *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*, edited by Michael J. Gilmour (New York City, NY: Continuum, 2005), pp. 129-157 (p. 130)

<sup>41</sup> All on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*, LP (Mute Records, 2004). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 390-391 ('Messiah Ward'), 395-396 ('Nature Boy'), 397-398 ('Abattoir Blues') and 418-420 ('O Children')

The tone of the early records is generally evangelical, where invocations of bluesmen who died half a century earlier is the closest that his narratives come to the present day. Even when writing about the archetypal Twentieth Century protagonist in Presley, Cave's rhetoric remained enigmatic, rejecting a contemporary vocabulary for the more Biblical imagery of floods, kings and beasts.

Cave notes in an interview that the addition of modern terminology, after heavy editing, was done consciously as 'a kind of ugly jerk into the times we actually live in'.<sup>42</sup> In echoing a statement that the intimate violence of his early lyrics addressed 'a certain numbness in the world today ... that accepts certain kinds of violence, but is against other kinds',<sup>43</sup> it would appear that his core concerns remain unchanged despite the verbal shake up. However, with this update clearly a considered progression from the early work, it also affords Cave a greater degree of clarity. Whereas songs like 'City of Refuge' see 'the curse of God roar through' Cave's blues-prophets so that their words echo down the ages, his 21<sup>st</sup>-Century dispatches train their gaze on recent history. While words may 'give songs their social use', their concurrent ability to 'work on ordinary language'<sup>44</sup> allows Cave to elucidate his visions of sin by intently scrutinising the modern world.

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In a now quarter-century-long career so attuned to the currents of the blues, it is intriguing that 'Abattoir Blues' is the first instance of Cave using the term in a song title. Moreover, though it explicitly invokes Ralph Ellison's definition of the genre as the 'autobiographical

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<sup>42</sup> Debbie Kruger, 'Nick Cave: The Songwriter Speaks', in *Sinner Saint: The True Confessions, Thirty Years of Essential Interviews*, edited by Mat Snow (Medford, NJ: Plexus, 2011), pp. 128-145 (p. 136). Original publication date 2005. Cave notes the large amount of 'rewriting' that went into the album on page 134.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Reynolds, 'Of Misogyny, Murder and Melancholy: Meeting Nick Cave', in Snow pp. 49-55 (p. 55)

<sup>44</sup> Frith p. 91



chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically'<sup>45</sup> and Warnes's 'redemptive oppositionality', the song in fact breaks rank with the blues forms that Cave has so fruitfully mined.

Blues songs tend to begin with the singer either establishing themselves within their immediate surroundings or delivering an evocative tale about a well-defined geographical point. Johnson's 'Cross Road Blues' has him at the Highway 61 cross road, down on his knees and praying for salvation, while Hooker's 'Tupelo Blues' recounts the destruction as if witnessed first-hand ('I'll never forget it | The mighty flood in Tupelo').<sup>46</sup> When boundaries between the actual and fantastical are blurred – Johnson's worry that the 'dark gon' catch me here', or Hooker's allusion to the Biblical Noah story in the 'flood' of the song's first line – the narrative still remains identifiably grounded within the south. These tales are supported by a musical accompaniment centred on the given key's I (tonic), IV (fourth) and V (fifth) chords, with verse lengths built in multiples of four bars (generally twelve to twenty-four per verse).

Even before one deals with the lyrics, 'Abattoir Blues' challenges a listener savvy to the histories of the genre. Beginning on the IV rather than I chord, the verses conclude with the V moving to a VI (sixth) chord. Ending thus with an interrupted rather than the expected perfect cadence, the song's home key now becomes a sombre A minor instead of C major. This final chord is only held for the length of two bars, making each verse ten bars long rather than twelve. The chorus also contains curiously detached call-and-response vocals, which unlike in '... Henry' bear no relation to Cave's lyric, and the female chorus simply 'ooh yeah'-ing away in the background feels incongruous when contrasted with Cave's troubled words.

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Warnes p. 312

<sup>46</sup> On *The Cream*, LP (Tomato Records, 1975). Reprinted by permission of Tomato Records Ltd.

The lyrical forms of the blues are similarly destabilised. Though the narrator admits at the end of the song that he has ‘got the abattoir blues’, at no point is an abattoir actually described. Indeed, it is debatable whether Cave is in the building or simply thinking about it. The only other mention of an abattoir comes in the opening verse:

The sun is high up in the sky and I’m in my car

Drifting down into the abattoir

Do you see what I see, dear?

The description of Cave ‘[d]rift[ing]’ behind the wheel is perplexing. The word seems more apt for detailing a flight of fancy, closer to John Keats’s narrator who would ‘fade’ with his nightingale away from ‘[t]he weariness, the fever, and the threat’ of a world ‘[w]here but to think is to be full of sorrow’.<sup>47</sup> The opening and closing verses of Keats’s poem situate the poet physically in the countryside so as to bookend the imaginative abstractions of the poem’s body. ‘Abattoir Blues’ does something similar – while the train of thought begun in the first verse rounds off with the closing couplet ‘I got the abattoir blues | Right down to my shoes’, the intermediary verses act as a meditation on where the thought of an abattoir leads him.

Those verses continually blur the distinction between whether Cave is describing an abattoir or some more general condition of society. Though the song contains references to a ‘culture of death’, ‘mass extinction’ and the dead ‘heaped across the land’, it is never clear whether they are reportage or vision. If anything, the more brooding turns of phrase tend towards the latter – what explicitly about an abattoir would lead Cave to think of an ‘unholy evolutionary trajectory’, or assert that ‘everything’s dissolving’ around him? Even when

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Ode To A Nightingale’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. 193-195 (ll. 20, 23, 27)

asking his lover ‘shall we leave this place’ he seems to be asking more for an escape from the world at large via ‘the line that God throws down to you and me’.

The enigmatic ‘[d]o you see what I see?’, where what Cave either actually or metaphorically sees is never revealed, only compounds this feeling of abstraction. Particularly when the line later morphs into ‘[d]o you feel what I feel’ and, with a turn of phrase shadowed by ‘Tupelo’s rumbling thunder of apocalypse, ‘do you hear what I hear babe? | Does it make you feel afraid?’, the question behind the question seems to be ‘do you understand what this abattoir represents?’. Rather than the ‘abattoir blues’ coming from one’s experiences *in* an abattoir, the song’s blue heart stems from *the fact of an abattoir* and what a society that allows for ‘mass extinction’ means to Cave on an individual level.

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In his essay-cum-novella *The Lives of Animals*, J. M. Coetzee hypothesises on the connection between abattoirs and the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Coetzee’s literary alter-ego Elizabeth Costello first outlines the moral implications of life under the Third Reich:

Germans of a particular generation are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity, as having to do or be something special before they can be readmitted to the human fold. They lost their humanity [...] a certain line was crossed which took people beyond the ordinary murderousness and cruelty of warfare into a state that we can only call sin.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999 (p. 20)

Living in a society that endorses mass-murder can gravely affect one's moral being without one actually perpetrating any of the violence. Costello does not ring-fence the problem as solely related to exceptional societies like Hitler's Germany. For her, sin is at large in the contemporary world due to the presence of abattoirs. She outlines an evolutionary chain between slaughterhouses and death camps and asks whether, in a society that 'need[s] factories of death, our ethical makeup is all that different to those citizens who existed in a 'state of sin':

Each day a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched [...] there is no punishment [...] You do not feed four billion people through the efforts of matadors or deer-hunters armed with bows and arrows. We have become too many [...] We need factories of death; we need factory animals. Chicago showed us the way; it was from the Chicago stockyard that the Nazis learned how to process bodies.<sup>49</sup>

In light of Coetzee's work, Cave's apparent initial reluctance to write a blues that deals with his personal surroundings reveals itself as exactly that. In showing what the abattoir means to him rather than detailing his experiences within it, concurrent with his incorporation of scenes of 'mass extinction' and the vernacular of the modern day, Cave pinpoints the exact nature of the societal transgression he has concerned himself with since 'Tupelo'. The abattoir acts a signifier for the 'culture of death' that he is surrounded by. The 'place' which he wishes to leave is an entire society living in Costello's 'state of sin', a society which has at its core the 'routine atrocity' recurrent throughout the *Abattoir Blues* project.

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<sup>49</sup> pp. 35, 53

Furthermore, Cave finds his own morality compromised in much the same way as Costello's:

The sky is on fire, the dead are heaped across the land  
I went to bed last night and my moral code got jammed  
I woke up this morning with a Frappucino in my hand

In keeping with the song's off-kilter feel, it appears odd that something as innocuous as a Frappucino is linked to the apocalyptic – quite possibly post-Holocaust – vision of the dead 'heaped across the land'.<sup>50</sup> The narrator of '... Henry', emulating Christ's 'spiritual duty' of individual freedom, was confident enough in his quest as to allow for murder along the way. Why is Cave now so troubled by the purchase of a coffee?

To answer this question, one need see it in the light of the contemporary 'state of sin' as represented by the abattoir. Costello asserts that living in a world of abattoirs compromises the essential 'human kindness' of every citizen. Moreover, this is not solely limited to those who buy the 'fragments of corpses'<sup>51</sup> produced within stockyards. Even Costello herself – a vegetarian and someone who, similarly to Cave's blues-prophets, is described as 'a preacher, a social reformer'<sup>52</sup> – falls foul of the sinfulness of slaughterhouse society:

I'm wearing leather shoes [...] I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect [for me] if I were you.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The Holocaust – and more specifically documentary images of the atrocity – explicitly enters Cave's work four years later: '[My friend] brings me a book on Holocaust poetry |----complete with pictures----'. 'We Call Upon the Author', on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *DIG, LAZARUS, DIG!!!*, LP (Mute Records, 2008). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 465-467.

<sup>51</sup> Both p. 69

<sup>52</sup> p. 67

<sup>53</sup> p. 43

Seemingly innocuous gestures, often involving the purchase of commodities, can lead one into an ethical grey zone. In a passive, barely perceptible manner, one becomes participant in the 'culture of death'. Owning the shoes and purse 'jam' Costello's moral code in much the same way as the Frappuccino does Cave's. In buying a Frappuccino or a purse, something of their personal agency, of their 'human kindness' and 'spiritual duty', has been taken away.

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Even on an album brimming with the language of modernity, 'Frappuccino' is the most recent coinage used. The word originated a decade before the album's release and was popularised by the coffee-house franchise behemoth Starbucks.<sup>54</sup> 'Frappuccino' has within it the same undertones of mass-market consumerism and mechanical production of commodities as Costello's 'factories of death'. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer detail the effects of post-industrial consumer society on both public and citizen in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: '[the] pliability of the masses grow[s] with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them.'<sup>55</sup> Via the stylised disseminations of those controlling the cultural and political means of production, one's selfhood is traded for a kind of 'pseudo-individuality' moulded to suit the dominant classes.<sup>56</sup> Once the individual becomes accepting of their pseudo-individuality, they can be manipulated to destructive ends:

Men were given their individuality as unique in each case, different to all others, so that it might all the more surely be made the same as any other [...] The unity of the manipulated collective consists in the negation of each individual [...] The horde

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<sup>54</sup> See Janelle Nanos, 'The Story of the Frappuccino', <<http://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/blog/2012/12/07/frappuccino-history/>> [accessed 10 April 2014]

<sup>55</sup> p. xv

<sup>56</sup> p. 155

which so assuredly appears in the organization of the Hitler Youth is [...] the triumph of repressive equality.<sup>57</sup>

The Frappuccino can be read as an updated signifier of what Adorno and Horkheimer in the early 1940s termed the ‘culture industry’,<sup>58</sup> the maelstrom of movies and commodities which intimate individual agency but in fact transform the self into ‘a monopoly commodity determined by society’. The culture industry ultimately ‘does not sublimate [but] represses’, combining with political domination to ensure that via ‘the circle of manipulation and retroactive need[,] the unity of the system grows ever stronger’.<sup>59</sup> The Frappuccino ‘jams’ Cave’s ‘moral code’ because it signifies a deviation from the righteous individuality of Christ and the bluesman and a slide towards compliance with the ‘dull rationality’ of the controlling powers. Cave’s Christ, one will remember, fought against those ‘enemies of the imagination’ who represented an ‘established order’ intent on curtailing individual expressive impulses. Those ‘scribes and Pharisees’ are prototypes for the controlling bodies of Enlightenment, a group who also find a mirror-image in the ‘Eurocentric or “civilized” culture [that the blues] once opposed on southern grounds’.

Cave, for so long journeying down the holy road of the blues-Christ path of ‘redemptive oppositionality’, finds himself derailed by this pseudo-individualising culture. In this manner, he fulfils another of those blues epistemologies he initially seemed to have eschewed, Ellison’s ‘autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe’:

Mass extinction, darling, hypocrisy

These things are not good for me

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<sup>57</sup> p. 13

<sup>58</sup> See ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, in Adorno and Horkheimer (pp. 120-167)

<sup>59</sup> pp. 154, 140, 121

*Abattoir Blues...* deals with both the ‘mass extinction’ and ‘hypocrisy’ of the Enlightenment, which will not admit its designs on your individuality while it unsuspectingly co-opts you into its barbarity. Though one may be more sly and passive than the other, ‘TV’ and the ‘gulag’ are essentially two sides of the same coin in their intent to manipulate the individual. As with Costello who recognizes the now problematic nature of her own ‘human kindness’, Cave is aware that the hyper-murder of abattoir society has designs on his individuality. The drinking of a Frappuccino is a small but significant step towards being controlled by the proscriptive society against which he, in Christ’s image, has always railed.

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With the dawning of the new millennium, Cave surveys the wreckage of a bygone and brutal century. The *fin de siecle* stylings of his more recent work transplant those moral dispatches from the book of ‘Tupelo’ into the day-to-day practices of industrial capitalism, and what they find there is deeply troubling. To maintain one’s individual agency and remain true to the ‘redemptive oppositionality’ of the blues becomes increasingly difficult when visions of sin appear constantly, be they beamed back to you through a television screen or triggered by the coffee held in your hand.

Similar concerns are addressed nine years later on his album *Push the Sky Away*, and particularly on another of Cave’s off-kilter blues. Cave’s narrator now struggles to navigate an ever-changing world, and while on *Abattoir Blues...* Cave generally maintained control over the terminology of the contemporary, its bewildering developments means that total linguistic control begins to elude him. While the falcon may be able to hear the falconer, it could be that his message is not understood due to shifting linguistic sands.



**THREE****‘CAN YOU FEEL MY HEART BEAT?’: CAVE AND REDEMPTIVE FEELING**

The question, as ever, is ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?’ And my answer is, by offering ‘befitting emblems of adversity’.<sup>60</sup>

**Seamus Heaney**

‘Higgs Boson Blues’ mimics ‘Abattoir Blues’ in re-imagining the musical and aesthetic tropes of the genre. Again based around the fourth, fifth and sixth chords rather than the standard trinity of the I-IV-V, Cave once more displaces the blues of the self onto a whole society. Though early in the track he is ‘Sitting and singing | The Higgs Boson Blues’,<sup>61</sup> he soon observes that ‘Everybody [is] bleeding’ from it. The landscape is similarly ominous, with the fiery sky of ‘Abattoir Blues’ echoed by the ‘flame trees [which] line the streets’. The culture industry and the Pharisees appear once again – the former represented by Disney-pop sensation Miley Cyrus, the latter by a missionary. This missionary is cut from the same staid cloth of canonical religion as the Reverend of ‘... Henry’ – ‘Canon law’, a system of which the missionary is representative, is here introduced not by a man of God but by the ‘genodical’ Lucifer. He brings disease and pestilence as he embarks upon a colonial project which was as detrimental to the colonised as it was beneficial:

Look! Here come the missionary

With his smallpox and flu

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<sup>60</sup> ‘Feelings into Words’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber & Faber), pp. 14-25 (p. 24)

<sup>61</sup> On Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *Push the Sky Away*, LP (Bad Seed Records, 2013). Reprinted by permission of Bad Seed Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 513-515.

## He's saving them savages with his Higgs Boson Blues

By referring to the colonised as 'savages', Cave ironically mimics the language of the essentialising colonial officer. It bears more than a passing similarity to the racist parlance of Warnes's aristocratic whites. As with God speaking with a bluesman's tongue in '... Henry', Cave once more affects the linguistic touches of the genre ('come' and 'them') to foreground an antagonism between himself and the missionary.

Like the coded atrocity of the abattoir, the friction between Cave's righteous blues-prophesying and the Higgs Boson rewards unpacking. The term is more topical than anything used on the 2004 album. Scientists at the Geneva CERN institute proclaimed their discovery of the Higgs Boson particle a year prior to the release of *Push the Sky Away*. The finding was heralded as 'the final ingredient to be discovered in what's known as the Standard Model of Particle Physics.'<sup>62</sup> In popular parlance, the Higgs Boson has been nicknamed the 'God particle' due its centrality to the Big Bang theory and the argument it underpins against creationism and, ultimately, the existence of God.

For Cave, the threat posed by the Higgs Boson is of the world trading in the 'spiritual duty' of Christlike individuality for the curtailing of the creative imagination by reasoned thought. Once more, the problem stems from the 'dull rationality' of the practices of Enlightenment. As Adorno and Horkheimer assert, Enlightenment trades only in scientific reasoning:

Positivism [...] has removed the very last insulating instance between individual behaviour and the social norm [...] Reason itself has become the mere instrument of

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<sup>62</sup> Loyola Marymount University, 'Q&A: Prof. Jonas Mureika on the Higgs Boson' <<http://www.lmu.edu/Page85725.aspx>> [Accessed 16 April 2014]

the all-inclusive economic apparatus [...] The formalization of reason is only the intellectual expression of mechanized production.<sup>63</sup>

Cave being an artist who once proclaimed that there are ‘only two things I care about: love and God’,<sup>64</sup> the prospect of God being replaced by a ‘God particle’ batters with great force at his sense of self. He begins and ends the song by singing ‘[I] can’t remember anything at all’, delivered with barely more than a whisper to indicate his immense exertions across the track’s eight-minute span. The piece is punctuated by moments of unusual inarticulacy (‘I’m tired’) and no fewer than six references to how ‘hot’ the world is. It seems that he is continually warding off the possibility of annihilation, so much so that at one point he wonders ‘if I [may] die tonight’.

One of the key constitutive links between Cave and God also begins to fail. In his 1999 lecture ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’, Cave makes the point that ‘the use of language’ allows him to ‘writ[e] God into existence.’<sup>65</sup> While this is a near-identical argument to that of ‘The Flesh Made Word’, the emphasis on language here bears particular scrutiny due to the hesitant and confused parlance of ‘Higgs Boson Blues’. Whereas on ‘Abattoir Blues’ Cave kept the language and the sin of the contemporary world at arm’s length – literally in the case of the Frappuccino – by maintaining a certain observational detachment, here the immediacy of the threat may silence his Godly quest. The line ‘It’s hot, that’s why they call it the hot spot’ alludes to another term of the present-day, wireless Internet ‘hot-spots’, evincing Cave’s lyrical pre-occupation with the World-Wide-Web at the time of writing.<sup>66</sup> Cave delivers this line as a frenzied complaint, unnerved that this linguistic

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<sup>63</sup> pp. 30, 104

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Anna Kessler, ‘Faith, Doubt, and the Imagination: Nick Cave on the Divine-Human Encounter’, in Gilmour pp. 79-94 (p.79)

<sup>65</sup> In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 1-19 (p. 6)

<sup>66</sup> ‘These songs convey how on the Internet profoundly significant events, momentary fads and mystically-tinged absurdities sit side-by-side and question how we might recognise and assign weight to what’s genuinely

perversion masks the real heat of imminent crisis where ‘Everybody [is] bleeding | To the Higgs Boson Blues’ as the ‘spiritual groove’ of their individuality and imaginative access to divinity drains out of them. The tone of distress is similarly pronounced when two lines later he ‘Hear[s] a man preaching in a language that’s completely new’. Everywhere he goes he is misunderstood, and where the innate divinity of language once provided a docking point in which Cave’s preacher-personas could stabilise, its ever-accelerating colonisation by the dialectic of Enlightenment threatens both the silencing of Cave’s blues-prophet and the dissolution of ‘everything’ foreseen on ‘Abattoir Blues’.

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In spite of Cave’s at times feverish weakness, a last vestige of the blues-prophet’s fervour pushes him once more down a ‘road’ of both personal and societal deliverance. While the sentient tools of memory and language begin to fall apart, Cave is jerked into action by a kind of innate responsive mechanism:

Can’t remember anything at all

*But* [emphasis added] I’m driving my car down to Geneva [...]

[...] Have you ever heard about the Higgs Boson Blues?

I’m going down to Geneva baby

Gonna teach it to you

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important.’ [www.nickcave.com](http://www.nickcave.com), ‘Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds *Push The Sky Away* – Out February 2013’ <<http://www.nickcave.com/news/new-album-nick-cave-the-bad-seeds-push-the-sky-away-out-18-feb/>> [Accessed 16 April 2014]. A reference to the website Wikipedia appears on the track ‘We Real Cool’. See *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 510-511 (p. 511).

As with Henry's 'road', Cave driving his car is a throwback to those many mythologised journeys along Highway 61. Furthermore, though the ultimate destination remains Geneva, the journey that he makes here in fact takes him down the very same 'blues highway' that has so frequently underpinned his oppositional aesthetic:

Black road long and I drove and drove

Came upon a crossroad [...]

[...] I see Robert Johnson

Johnson's Faustian pact at the Highway 49-61 crossroads – a story that owes its infamously in part to 'Cross Road Blues' – is one of the most widely recounted legends of blues history. Cave's journey also takes him through Memphis, the city most closely associated with the career of Elvis Presley. As in '... Henry', the road is taken not only to circumnavigate a society of Pharisees like the missionary but also to provide Cave with an interpretive framework through which he can 'teach' something to addressee and society alike. Almost thirty years on from 'Tupelo', and with the object of his ire halfway across the world, Cave continues to draw strength from that same semi-imagined South.

Despite Cave remarking early on that he will 'teach [the Higgs Boson Blues] to you', the song actually contains few further instances of forthright address. Indeed, when they do occur, the way in which they zoom in on the nature of those blues is initially obtuse. One of only three other cases of Cave talking to 'you' occurs immediately before the 'missionary' line:

The monkey has a gift that he is sending back to you

Concurrent with his incorporation of contemporary language and genocidal visions, primates become increasingly prominent in Cave's 21<sup>st</sup>-Century output. The cover of his 2007 album with Grinderman, a record that dwells extensively on frustrated male sexual desire, depicts a monkey bent over and cupping its genitals.<sup>67</sup> On *Abattoir Blues...* the songs 'There She Goes, My Beautiful World', 'Supernaturally' and 'The Fable of the Brown Ape' all contain the word 'ape'. The latter is a strange tale of an ape and a serpent nurtured by a farmer. The townsfolk come to kill the animals, only for the ape to escape and 'roam the ranges [... singing] to its friend | Whom he may never see again'.<sup>68</sup> Monkeys and apes appear indicative some sort of curbed instinct, with their 'gift' sent 'back' to you something lost and in need of rediscovery.

One here recalls the 'unholy evolutionary trajectory' of 'Abattoir Blues'. In evolutionary terms, monkeys are proto-humans, the animal core from which man has developed. If one takes the monkey-state as the point of germination, it seems that the 'culture of death' derails the natural evolution of the individual who remains in touch with strong, primal feeling for that same pseudo-individuality and prescriptive emotion of the Enlightenment. Just as the farmer's ape in 'The Fable...' is first chained up by and eventually estranged from his 'friend' man, Adorno and Horkheimer repeatedly note how one of the primary traits of the Enlightened pseudo-individual is the suppression of all 'animal' characteristics:

For civilization, pure natural existence, animal and vegetative, was the absolute danger [...] to be feared as implying a reversion of the self to that mere state of nature

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix 1. For the album's most vividly painted cuckold, see 'No Pussy Blues'. Despite the narrator's multifarious attempts to seduce his girl, he finds time and again that she 'just never wants to'. On *Grinderman*, LP (Mute Records, 2007). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 435-436.

<sup>68</sup> In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 392-394 ('There She Goes, My Beautiful World'), 401-402 ('The Fable of the Brown Ape') and 412-413 ('Supernaturally')

from which it had estranged itself with so huge an effort, and which therefore struck such terror into the self.<sup>69</sup>

In Cave's idiosyncratic version of Christianity, there is ample room for the monkey and the Creation to co-exist. Indeed, Cave's monkey could be described not merely as proto-human but proto-Jesus, for the monkey's 'gift' is the rediscovery of just that primal feeling that Cave admires in Christ's 'boiling anger' and fears being expunged from an overly rationalised world. Cave encourages you to receive the gift of innate feeling in order to assert one's individual agency and reject the pseudo-individualisation of Enlightenment. The manner in which this is done parallels the 'damning finger' thrust out by the blues-prophets of the early work – directly after the gift is offered, Cave orders one to 'Look!' at the missionary 'saving them savages with his Higgs Boson Blues' in a way that recalls the narrator of 'Tupelo' instructing his congregation to 'Looka yonder!' at the coming clouds of judgement.

The individualising potential of monkey-feeling and the blues are married in another moment of direct address:

Can you feel my heart beat?

This line comes immediately after the 'die tonight' verse. Repeated for effect, Cave sings it with great force, as if the fact that his heart beats beyond the possibility of death is a refutation of the annihilation threatened by the overheated landscape. Moreover, the line is encoded with a rejection of the designs that the Higgs Boson Blues has on his individuality.

In his analysis of the post-punk band Wire's song 'Heartbeat',<sup>70</sup> Warnes traces the narrator's solace of his beating heart to those plantation songs which are a consistent

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<sup>69</sup> p. 31. In the chapter 'Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality' (pp. 81-119) they offer a sustained critique of Marquis de Sade in which they challenge his notion that man has 'good grounds [...] for refusing to acknowledge the ape as our brother.' (p. 110)

ancestral touchstone of the blues. Wire's song trades on the same methods of self-affirmation that Warnes sees chronicled by Frederick Douglass, one where the song and the heartbeat 'opposed [the] reduction' of the slave's heart to 'little more than a pump or a machine' and refute the southern 'process of racial dehumanization':

The "I" of the lyric blames himself for his own deterioration [... and t]his sense of deficiency propels him towards the brink, forcing him to consider suicide and thus to follow in the footsteps of countless personas of countless blues lyrics. Then the rhythm of his own heartbeat [...] begins to conquer the threatened obliteration of identity, allowing the singer to assert his own "mesmerizing" individuality [...] A kind of recovery of hope, of affect, occurs.<sup>71</sup>

One sees a similar progression in Cave's song. The de-individualising tendencies of Enlightenment that bring on the society-wide blues see Cave threatened with death. Everywhere he turns he is confronted by a world where the 'spiritual duty' of Christ-like communication is being replaced by positivist factuality, where the Godly agency of the creative imagination is traded for the hyper-rationality of a 'God particle'. However, with the sentient functions of memory and language ailing, the 'recovery of affect' held in the beating heart comes from a space beyond cognition. It is a similarly innate mechanism to that which sparks Cave into 'driv[ing] my car down to Geneva' despite the failure of his memory. The feeling of a beating heart confirms his monkey-element, that stirring individuality of primal feeling, as well as an unshakeable faith in the Godliness of the creative spirit. Yoked again to the oppositional individuality of the blues, the line takes on a similar rhetorical agency to 'Do you see what I see, dear?'. In roaring 'Can you feel my heart beat?' after the threatened

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<sup>70</sup> From their LP *Chairs Missing*, released in the same year (1978) as Cave's first recorded output with The Boys Next Door.

<sup>71</sup> pp. 331-332



obliteration of self, Cave beats back the world of the Higgs Boson by the ordering it to acknowledge his individual worth.

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‘Feel’, of course, is an operative word in ‘Abattoir Blues’ – ‘Do you feel what I feel, dear? [...] Does it make you feel afraid?’ The fact that Cave’s narrator feels fear troubles him greatly, giving him the ‘abattoir blues’, but it is this same capacity to feel before a world so lacking in empathy that allows him to extricate himself from the ‘state of sin’ of the abattoir. Before the ‘culture of death’ as against the Southern aristocrats one lays claim to one’s individuality by ‘getting fierce, loud and *down*’.<sup>72</sup> The recognition of a personal abattoir blues becomes a rejection of a more general blues that dogs society at large.

Cave’s belief in the negative capability of strong feeling is given quite plainly in ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’. Decrying the ‘hysterical technocracy of modern music’, one that seeks to push out ‘sadness [by] denying it its voice’, he asserts that love songs are necessarily sad for ‘they all address God [... and are] the cry of one chained to the earth and craving flight, a flight into inspiration and imagination and divinity’.<sup>73</sup> The phrasing here echoes Christ’s example as a man who emphasised that ‘[d]ivinity must be given its freedom to flow through us, through language, through communication, through imagination’. If one is to commune with God through the imagination by imitating Jesus’ ‘essential humanness’, one can only do so by acknowledging all emotions, including both joy and ‘boiling anger’.

It is remarkable how similar the ‘hysterical technocracy’ is to Adorno and Horkheimer’s culture industry. As Cave sees it, the music industry is one where ‘true sorrow’, for him the fundamental building block of all love songs, ‘is just not welcome’. The

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<sup>72</sup> Gussow p. 16

<sup>73</sup> pp. 7-8

music he hears on the radio – presumably sung by the likes of Miley Cyrus – is made up of ‘Hate Songs disguised as Love Songs’ and is ‘not to be trusted’.<sup>74</sup> These are phrases that would fit seamlessly into *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and when Adorno and Horkheimer assert the culture industry’s latent promise that ‘everyone can be happy, if only he will capitulate fully and sacrifice his claim to happiness’,<sup>75</sup> Cave indicates a neat way to reject its overtures – ‘I’m happy to be sad’.<sup>76</sup>

Moreover, Cave’s conception of the love song as ‘a sad song’, even ‘the noise of sorrow itself’,<sup>77</sup> is striking in its affinity with the anguish at the heart of the blues. The way in which many love songs will ‘attach themselves to actual experience [and] are a poeticizing of real events’<sup>78</sup> chimes with Ellison’s ‘autobiography of personal catastrophe’, and their prerogative desire ‘to be transported from darkness into light’ echoes the ‘redemptive oppositionality’ that grounds Warnes’s definition. Both the blues and the love song – ‘an alternate world [where the imagination] sits and dines with loss and longing, madness and melancholy, ecstasy, magic and joy’<sup>79</sup> – provide spaces where the full gamut of human emotion, and thus one’s ‘mesmerizing individuality’, can be celebrated.

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If the blues provide a scaffold from which Cave can deliver his dispatches on the importance of individual feeling, the devotional nature of the love song gives an affirmative response that the ‘gift’ of emotion is to be trusted. The journey of the words ends with the lover, whose corporeal and emotional reciprocation provides Cave with the strength to continue on down

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<sup>74</sup> pp. 11, 8

<sup>75</sup> p. 153

<sup>76</sup> p. 18

<sup>77</sup> p. 7

<sup>78</sup> p. 18

<sup>79</sup> ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’ pp. 17, 18-19

his spiritual ‘road’. Across Cave’s catalogue, groundswells of feeling – be they love, horror, sadness or wonder – use the lover and the love song as divining rods for relocating the creative imagination’s ‘power to combat all enemies’.

It is via the lover that Cave extricates himself from the ‘culture of death’ in ‘Abattoir Blues’. In asking if she too ‘feel[s] what I feel’, there is a tacit acknowledgment that her affirmative response will cause God to throw down the line and allow them to ‘leave this place’ of sin. Their correspondence is not merely emotional but also physical, for the ‘squeeze’ that he gives her is what stabilises him so that together they can ‘avert this unholy evolutionary trajectory’ of the abattoir society. They become, as in Cave’s description of his 1997 song ‘Far From Me’, ‘two lover-heroes against an uncaring world’,<sup>80</sup> finding in feeling what Michel de Certeau terms a ‘tactic’ for forming a ‘network of an antidiscipline’ with which to constructively oppose contemporary society.<sup>81</sup>

When the protagonist of ‘Nature Boy’ is immobilised by the ‘ordinary slaughter’, his father asserts that only by recognising the horror in the world can one find redemption in goodness:

My father said, don’t look away

You’ve got to be strong, you’ve got to be bold, now

He said that in the end it is beauty

That is going to save the world

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<sup>80</sup> ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’ p. 17

<sup>81</sup> ‘Many everyday practices [...] are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many “ways of operating”: victories of the “weak” over the “strong” (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks [...] and] joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike.’

*The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. xv, xix

Rebuffing the message of ‘Messiah Ward’ (‘It’s easier just to look away’), the power of beauty to overcome horror echoes Cave’s maxim from ‘The Secret Life of the Love Song’ that ‘goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil’.<sup>82</sup> The father’s advice here recalls both the message of Jesus in Cave’s essays and the emphasis on black ‘somebodiness’ birthed by the blues by reconstituting Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s teaching on Christ: ‘it is love that will save our world and our civilization, love even for our enemies’.<sup>83</sup> As with the heartbeat in ‘Higgs Boson Blues’, love strikes at the core of Cave’s person when ‘she [the lover] moves something deep inside of me’, and it is the lover who draws Cave’s eye towards the world’s redeeming beauty as promised by the father: ‘You pointed at something and said | Have you ever seen such a beautiful thing?’

On ‘Lime Tree Arbour’, which appears along with ‘Far From Me’ on the 1997 album *The Boatman’s Call*, a comforting hand provides a route to God much like the lover’s touch in ‘Abattoir Blues’. Death stalks the narrator from the off, with opening line ‘The boatman calls from the lake’<sup>84</sup> a reference to Charon, the ferryman of Greek mythology who carries the souls of the deceased to Hades. As with the father’s message in ‘Nature Boy’, the narrator acknowledges that pain cannot be avoided, for in this world ‘[t]here will always be suffering’. However, it can be withstood and overcome, and the lover’s comforting hand provides a link to God similar to the speaking rain of ‘... Henry’ so that the narrator might steel himself against hardship:

She puts her hand over mine [...]

[...] Through every breath that I breathe

And every place I go

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<sup>82</sup> p. 8

<sup>83</sup> Quoted in Jillian Burt, ‘The Light Within: The Twenty-First Century Love Songs of Nick Cave’, in Dalziell and Welberry pp. 13-29 (p. 15)

<sup>84</sup> On Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *The Boatman’s Call*, LP (Mute Records, 1997). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* p. 275.

There is a hand that protects me

And I do love her so

At the end of this chorus, the song moves from A minor to C major facilitated by an embellishment known as the cadential 6-4. This cadence utilises the I chord in third inversion so that the bass note is the fifth degree of the scale and the lead melodic note the third.<sup>85</sup> This I now effectively acts as a transfigured V chord, making it ‘a harmonically strong chord even though it must be resolved’<sup>86</sup> by a V and finally I in its regular inversion. This progression gives the listener a sense of powerful resolution, particularly with the melody’s concurrent shift from the third degree of the scale down to the tonic, and the additional key change here neatly enacts the love song’s wish ‘to be transported from darkness into light’. Cave marries the descending melodic line to a lyrically manifested spiritual cadence similar to that used in ‘... Henry’. The strength he feels from the lover’s touch is conveyed by the solid, step-by-step movement down from ‘do’ with the 6-4, ‘love her’ on the V and ending on ‘so’ with the tonic I. As in later track ‘Gates to the Garden’, ‘God is in this hand I hold’,<sup>87</sup> and communication with Him via the lover has overcome the threat of death. By the song’s concluding verse ‘[t]he boatman [...] has gone’, and the lover has stabilised Cave before the world’s suffering so that he might continue to emulate Christ’s divine individuality ‘every place I go’.

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<sup>85</sup> For an extensive technical analysis of the cadential six-four, see Walter Piston, *Harmony* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1983), pp. 169-175

<sup>86</sup> Walter Piston, *Harmony* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1983), p. 170. For an extensive technical analysis of the cadential six-four, see pp. 169-175.

<sup>87</sup> ‘Gates to the Garden’, on Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *No More Shall We Part*, LP (Mute Records, 2001). Reprinted by permission of Mute Song Ltd. In *The Complete Lyrics* pp. 334-335 (p. 334).

## CONCLUSION

The blues manifests itself in the lyrics of Nick Cave in a variety of ways. Be it verbatim reference to the father-figures of the genre, his visionary and abstract blues of the Twenty-First-Century, or reconstituting its aesthetic tropes in the framework of a love song, it is always summoned in order that the message he is ‘escaped to tell’ rings true amidst the confusing and often disturbing workings of contemporary life. Despite fluctuations in rhetoric and performative mode, his core concern ultimately does not change, as communion with God ‘through language, through communication [and] through imagination’ is forever at the heart of his songwriting. Orbiting his radical interpretations of Biblical lore, the seemingly disparate facets of the Nick Cave persona – the preacher, the lover, even the pop-zoologist – are all informed by a keen affinity with God’s ways and His wishes. In some sense, Cave’s narrators are forever journeying down that road, for ‘every place [they] go’ they are disciplined by the ‘spiritual duty’ of Christlike individuality. This essay has looked to map that winding path through Cave’s extensive and unique body of work.

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**APPENDIX**

**ONE**

The cover of *Grinderman*'s eponymous debut LP.

