

**Review**

# The Corpse Bride: Ideal Beauty and Domestic Degradation in the Work of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

**Ingrid Fernandez**

Stanford University, 1273 Lakeside Drive, 1151, Sunnyvale, CA 94085, United States. E-mail: ingridf@stanford.edu.  
Tel.: 408-900-8193, Mobile: 305-877-2353.

Accepted 18 March 2014

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 1996 album, *Murder Ballads*, follows a tradition in which female sexuality is punished and women occupy supporting and often highly restricted or completely silent roles. Cave seems to take pleasure in playing the cunning, desire-driven killer and often utilizes the plot of the seduction of the unsuspecting female character who, after being taken to a secluded spot, offers little resistance to her killer, who then abandons her lifeless body. But Cave also indulges in personifying the doomed poet and lover of the Romantic tradition, one which brings a certain amount of vulnerability at odds with his hyper-masculinity. This is especially the case in the music video of "Where the Wild Roses Grow," in which he shares the frame of the screen as well as the vocals with Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue. The visual representation of the song provides an alternate reading in which femininity overpowers the misogyny present in the lyrics through the fluid presence of Minogue's body in contrast to that of Cave, who is awkward and rigid. My inquiry goes beyond the textual evidence of the lyrics to include embodied voices and Cave's performative persona, both of which prevent a simplistic diagnosis of the *Murder Ballads* as a primarily misogynist cultural production.

**Keywords:** Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds; murder ballads; women; beauty; domesticity; violence; post-punk

**INTRODUCTION**

Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' 1996 album, *Murder Ballads*, was hailed by critics as a masterpiece of cynicism and satire, a considerable achievement in the controversial singer and songwriter's career. Bill Van Parys from *Rolling Stone* magazine called it a work "artfully plunging into the depths of a reservoir of despair that many alternative rockers couldn't even dream of fathoming" (Van Parys, 2006). *Murder Ballads* continued the antagonism between Cave and his audience, bringing the connections among death, violence and eroticism to the fore and, as Van Parys affirms, "transforming [the traditional genre] into a timely vehicle of catharsis." This

is not a complete misdiagnosis. *Murder Ballads* at times engages in sharp social critique. Cave belittles various forms of established institutions, such as his parody of the mental health clinic as provider of criminal 'rehabilitation' in the humorous ballad "The Curse of Millhaven" and the reversal of the sentimental into the horrible in the ballads about romantic love, which prevents the listener from empathizing with the characters in the song. In addition, Cave plays with the genre and inverts some of its qualities, especially in his use of voice and the reworking of the confession. The latter method can evoke a complex type of pleasurable

torture in the listener, which is not unusual in Cave's work and functions brilliantly in *Murder Ballads*. But despite the tendentious subject matter and Cave's adaptation of the traditional genre, as a musical work, the album affirms the status quo.

Coming into the popular market in the 1980s, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds is an Australian band heavily influenced by punk and often classified as post-punk. It evolved from the more chaotic lyricism of The Birthday Party, also led by Cave. The band has been classified by some as gothic due to the songs' subject matter and the musical style. Cave indulges in the darker aspects of identity such as madness and obsession, with lyric narratives that transgress social boundaries, from the sanctity of life to blasphemy. In addition and as Emma McEvoy points out, the band's self-conscious performativity and a type of music that often juxtaposes "[the archaic], the folk-ballad, the industrial, the nostalgic, the lyric, the cheesy, the filmic" places them within the aesthetics of the gothic (McEvoy, 2007). *Murder Ballads* represents a detailed case study of the band's interest in liminal subject matter presented through over-the-top kitsch.

*Murder Ballads* follows a tradition in which female sexuality is punished and women occupy supporting and often highly restricted or completely silent roles. Cave utilizes standard formulae in stereotypical gender portrayals. This is most evident in his choice of characters and plots. He returns to set characters such as the poor innocent girl who blindly walks into her own demise or the maiden cut short of discovering sexual pleasure when she pays for her curiosity with her life. Cave seems to take pleasure in playing the cunning, desire-driven killer and often utilizes the plot of the seduction of the unsuspecting female character who, after being taken to a secluded spot, offers little resistance to her killer, who then abandons her lifeless body (Cohen, 1973). Cave could have decided to change the outcome of his narratives. In fact, traditional murder ballads offer different possibilities. As David Atkinson notes, "the ballad narratives rest in the domain of sin and judgment rather than that of crime and punishment" (Atkinson, 2002). In other words, the crime does not need to be publicly exposed and punished, but one way or another, the murderer is sure to helplessly stand face to face with his/her victim. Although dealing in the realm of the mystic, these ballads still affirm the restrictions of organized state institutions, acting as entertainment promoting dominant ideology; in this case, "murder will out." For instance, the *corpus delicti* repeatedly appears in traditional murder ballads as a return of the repressed in the form of the bleeding victimized body which marks and torments the killer (2002).

In the traditional murder ballad, the revelation of the murder, in many cases supernaturally, constitutes the

recurrent and characteristic feature (2002). But Cave desires complete mastery over his compositions, from plot to voice, and he is not particularly interested in moralizing about violence, but sees the act of murder as a primarily artistic endeavor. Even in songs in which the protagonist or one of the protagonists is female, like "Henry Lee" and "The Curse of Millhaven," his booming voice interrupts and overtakes or completely replaces the lower pitch of the female voice. Instead of exploiting the subversive possibilities of the murder ballad tradition, which entails a chaotic plurality of narratives among perpetrator, victim and community as well as bringing forth the voice of the corpse into discourse, Cave opts for a reified, spiritually ascending vision of death and imagines the individual in isolation from both society and history. Further, the choice of lyrics exhibits a deeply patriarchal point of view, aestheticizing the purity of the murdered maiden and asserting the privileged position of a God-like heroic murderer who kills to liberate the everyday working man/woman of his/her shackles as a subject bound by social institutions and modes of conduct. Cave, the bad boy of post-punk, heavily partakes of what Theodor Adorno terms the jargon of authenticity, misrepresenting romantic clichés of doomed love as immediate experience, violence as salvation and the moment of death as that of reaching pure identity and communion with the spiritual. *Murder Ballads* erects an artificial separation between nature and culture, positing the former as the lost and perpetually longed-for realm of the sublime with culture acting as the surreptitious intruder, poisoning the peaceful and balanced aura of the organic. This will become evident as we look at two ballads, "Song of Joy" and "Where the Wild Roses Grow," that exemplify Cave's rendition of the relationship between men and women within the contexts of nature and society.

It would be careless to ignore that Cave's stylistic approach to the murder ballad contains subversive elements and at times he undermines the misogynist quality often ascribed to his body of work, whether consciously or unconsciously. One of the primary characteristics of popular ballads, including murder ballads, lies in their ability to be consumed by a mass audience that often integrates these musical pieces into activities of daily toil, leisure and merry-making (Gummere, 1907). As a result, the music is not intended to be disturbing. To begin with, as part of oral tradition, the wide circulation and iteration of these sometimes parodic, moral stories and their handing down from one generation to another de-sensationalize the material. Musically, the feeling of familiarity is often achieved through a consistent tonality that, through repetition of both basic musical themes and lyrics, leads to "harmonic coherence," without significant increase or decrease in tension (Dunsby and Whittall, 1988). The development of

the basic idea follows an expected pattern that does not cause disruption in the musical structure. As a result, the listener can intuitively feel what comes next and easily follow the logic of the composition. In the case of some popular ballads, the lyrics become secondary to the melody, acting as complementary rather than being the driving force of the song. The melody distracts from the lyrics, often sung in a soft and carefree pitch that blends into the instrumental portion quite inconspicuously. This is the case, for instance, in Ella Fitzgerald's rendition of "Mack the Knife," a German import that some Americans consider quintessential to the musical heritage of the United States. In fact, Will Friedwald includes it in his book *Stardust Melodies*:

*The Biography of America's Most Popular Songs.* In contrast, the songs in Cave's *Murder Ballads* are mainly voice-driven. It is impossible to bypass Cave's thunderous voice accentuating every single lyric, which translates into every detail of the gruesome content of the songs, as we will see in the analysis of "Song of Joy," the piece with the most minute and non-idealized description of multiple murders of women (Friedwald, 2002).

In addition, Cave's own body, and the body of his voice, often raises contradictory sensations in the listener. In some songs, we find a husky, grainy texture expressing masculine aggression but also ritualistic prayer. It is almost like listening to a monotonic liturgy with vocal punctuation in the more violent or frenzied portions of the songs. It is not surprising that he privileges the first-person confessional throughout *Murder Ballads* and in other albums with similar content. But Cave also indulges in personifying the doomed poet and lover of the Romantic tradition, one which brings a certain amount of vulnerability at odds with his hyper-masculinity. This is especially the case in the music video of "Where the Wild Roses Grow," in which he shares the frame of the screen as well as the vocals with Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue. The visual representation of the song provides an alternate reading in which femininity overpowers the misogyny present in the lyrics through the fluid presence of Minogue's body in contrast to that of Cave, who is awkward and rigid. In this sense, a song like "Where the Wild Roses Grow" figures as a matrix of fixed masculine hierarchies of power constantly invaded by inversion and reversals, allowing the abject in the forms of the emasculated male and the feminine body to intrude into the dominant discourse. Perhaps the authoritarian and mesmerizing quality of the vocals coupled with this attractive and desire-ridden contradiction of feminine intrusion will assist us in explaining the album's commercial success and critics' tendency to canonize the work as "a poetic masterpiece - literate, sultry and tortured." In this case, my inquiry goes beyond the textual evidence of the lyrics to include embodied voices and Cave's performative persona, both of which prevent a

simplistic diagnosis of *Murder Ballads* as a primarily misogynist cultural production.

### Adorno's Jargon of Authenticity and its Function in Mass Culture

Adorno characterizes the jargon of authenticity as the vengeful return of theological addictions in a secularized form that worships authenticity as sacred, absolute and immediate. In his invective against this ready-made form of thought and communication, he claims:

While the jargon overflows with the pretense of deep human emotion, it is just as standardized as the world that it officially negates; the reason for this lies partly in its mass success, partly in the fact that it posits its message automatically, through its mere nature. Thus the jargon bars the message from the experience which is to ensoul it. (Adorno, 1973)

The jargon exerts its spell over the masses by mixing plebeian and elitist elements, promoting a façade of complete accessibility and universality. The speaker of the jargon encompasses the whole man at the expense of the individual, conflating his persona with timeless truths applicable to all humanity. In the jargon, human experience is overblown into the supernatural with even the most mundane of items endowed with a meaning by virtue of its mere existence. Every word of the jargon emanates sacredness and inflexibility, impeding any possible questioning as to its truth. In fact, questioning the jargon represents a form of sacrilege, a negation of the mysterious, or rather mystified, potential of human experience. Adorno cites this as a case in which "[o]ne is given to understand that that which occurs is so deep that language could not unhallow what has been said by saying it" (1973). The jargon applies to the world of music, often viewed as self-contained with a set of naturalized conventions that not only construct gendered roles but sharply divide the masculine from the feminine in the characterization of melodies. Susan McClary discusses the gendered aspects of musical composition in elements such as melody, style and subject matter. Melody is often characterized in terms of opposition: a strong melody signifies masculinity and a weak melody denotes the feminine. As a result, styles that follow the Romantic tradition are considered feminine as opposed to the more objective styles privileging regularity of structure over emotion (McClary, 1991). In order for a writer or composer to appropriate the subject matter associated with Romanticism, such as the unconscious and the world of fantasy and dream, he must conquer and re-masculinize the genre (1991). In the case of

Cave's music, as in opera, the male protagonist occupies center stage and relegates the feminine to a supporting role, one which is often silent. McClary characterizes this supporting role, the second narrative, as the "fatal slot" (1991).

This structure works on several levels across disciplines. If we take the case of Edgar Allan Poe, we consistently find a male character dwelling in the realm of the unconscious and the fantastic at the expense of the death of the female character. In one of his most famous poems, "Annabel Lee," the male protagonist explores his grief and darker emotions without the disruption of the female, who is, from the onset, already dead. Although the poem deals with the realm of emotion, it is tacitly written, with a predictable sonorous cadence and repetition of the major theme, in this case, the insistence of the sound of the 'e' at the end of each stanza ("be loved by me;" "coveted her and me;" "by the sea;" "killing my Annabel Lee;" "the beautiful Annabel Lee;" "by the sounding sea") (Poe, 2004). Something akin to this poetic structure occurs in musical compositions. As McClary notes:

[...] chromaticism, which enriches tonal music but which must finally be resolved to the triad for the sake of closure, takes on the cultural cast of "femininity." The 'feminine' never gets the last word within this context: in the world of traditional narrative, there are no feminine endings. (McClary, 1991)

I argue Cave employs a similar strategy in his narratives and musical compositions. He often occupies the role of narrator and feminine voices are relegated to the supporting cast. Cave also employs a basic theme that although transforming into the pentatonic, returns to the tonal as the song comes to an end. To further control the motion of his composition, he, like Poe, also repeats a similar motif in each section of his songs, using it as the bridge that supports the structure of the entire melody.

Adorno's jargon has two other characteristics, which I will also apply to Cave's *Murder Ballads*. First, the zenith of the jargon - its most pervasive quality - lies in the transformation of the negative into the positive. This type of thinking exalts powerless and nothingness as the very substance of Being, coercing individuals "to revere actual, avoidable, or at least corrigible needs as the most humane element in the image of Man" (Adorno, 1973). Not unlike the Christian ascetic priest denounced by Nietzsche, the glory of man stagnates in a state of illness. Nietzsche's herd of men is plagued by guilt and sin as that which is necessary and inevitable and therefore meaningful. It forces an unconditional will to moral truth based on the subject's utter self-contempt, degrading life with a "dishonest mendaciousness—a mendaciousness

that is abysmal but innocent, truehearted, blue-eyed, and virtuous" (Nietzsche, 1989). Directed at the masses, Adorno's jargon leaves theology behind but still trains the public to see suffering, evil and death as elements that must be accepted because they are a condition of being. In the egalitarian spirit of the jargon, this hides its totalitarian drive:

[...] all men are equal in their powerlessness, in which they possess being. Humanity becomes the most general and empty form of privilege. It is strictly suited to a form of consciousness which no longer suffers any privileges yet which still finds itself under the spell of privilege. Such universal humanity, however, is ideology [...] whoever refuses this appeal gives himself over as non-human to the administrators of the jargon, and can be sacrificed by them, if such as sacrifice is needed. (Adorno, 1973)

Secondly, what Adorno finds most dangerous in the jargon lies in its idealization of death as the most unmediated and personal moment of an individual's existence. For Heidegger, death is at one with *Dasein*, "pure identity, as in an existence which can absolutely not happen to any other person than oneself" (1973). Only in death can the individual gain freedom as absolute subject, finding redemption in his/her total destruction. This form of resignation sublimates the brutality of death by portraying it as an event that is not only natural but self-fulfilling. Death is integrated into the purest form of the organic and undisturbed pre-social realm of nature, opening the way to eternity of Being. In this manner, it disavows death's problematic rupture in the realm of the living as well as the concrete materiality of the corpse. Hence, Adorno accuses Heidegger of dressing up death. In the obsession with its heroic and transcendent dissolution, the negative transforms into the positive, justifying violence as a given in the natural world. With this persistent mystification and mythification of the human in relation to nature and pure Being, "[t]hat which is empty becomes an Arcanum:

the mystery of being permanently in ecstasy over some numinous thing which is preserved in silence" (1973).

Cave's philosophy of life as articulated in *Murder Ballads* closely follows Adorno's jargon of authenticity. Cave chooses a popular genre for his message, the ballad, which historically has and still continues to target the masses. After all, even the most macho of bands balance their more aggressive, female-objectifying public image with a couple of ballads and a music video shot in soft focus per album.<sup>1</sup> The appeal to the popular by using the

genre of the ballad is in line with Cave's positioning in the world of music. He has always constructed his persona as a mixture of the misunderstood poet and the common man, drawing on the Romantic stereotype without disavowing his earthy Australian roots. Flirting with doomed celebrity, various drug addictions and self-destructive behavior, he presents himself as an abject soul in a society which destroys the individual and induces an unbearable state of isolation. It is precisely in destitution that Cave finds the spiritual, following in the footsteps of Rimbaud and Baudelaire as well as musical contemporary Trent Reznor in the *Nine Inch Nails* song "Closer," where the speaker reaches God through violent and depraved sexual conduct. This avenue of expression has not been closed off to women and appropriated rather effectively. Writer Anaïs Nin rivalled lover Henry Miller with her tales of sexual exploit and ecstasy; French author and filmmaker Catherine Breillat has received mixed criticism from feminists for portraying a vision of female pleasure interlaced with denigration and violence; Madonna made her career out of juxtaposing the sacred and the profane, notoriously with the 1989 song and music video "Like a Prayer" and three years later, with the controversial, sexually descriptive album *Erotica*, which in my view contains some of her best work; and more recently, Lady Gaga infuses her songs and music videos with sadomasochistic motifs. But while the female artists mentioned above find a way to play with sexuality, plural identification, open bodily boundaries and sources of excitation and desire, their male counterparts take their sexual theology to heart, insisting on maintaining or taking up one clearly masculine identity that even if it seems vulnerable, is in the end self-enclosed and impermeable, much like that of the patriarchal God-figure they wish to replace.<sup>ii</sup> While Madonna inhabits the dominant role of the dominatrix in "Erotica," she is also able to have her voice heard while in a submissive position as in "Take a Bow" and "Die Another Day." Lady Gaga also oscillates between dominant and submissive roles in songs and music videos like "Bad Romance" and "Paparazzi." In contrast, the masculinity of Reznor is always self-affirming (he acts upon, rather than being acted upon - he fucks, he feels, he becomes "perfect") and maintains a single and action-driven identity. Cave is a prime example of a male artist who utilizes the interposition of the sacred and profane in his music as a way to approach the spiritual in a manner not far from that of Reznor. His commitment to this model comes through most clearly in interviews in which he explains the "calling" of the artist.

As a singer and songwriter, Cave pleads to be taken seriously by self-consciously quoting poets like Milton in "Song of Joy" and Yeats in "The Curse of Millhaven," elements he is glad to discuss in interviews. In fact, his song writing is meticulous and work intensive. He envies

Shane MacGowan, lead singer of The Pogues, due to what Cave sees as the latter's capacity for spontaneous creation (Share, 2001). On the other hand, Cave constantly undermines claims to formal education or refinement by casting himself as white trash, and bringing in excessive cursing and unmediated violence into the songs. For instance, in "Stagger Lee," he is one of the oppressed masses, taking on the character of the everyday man who suddenly snaps and goes on a murderous rampage, transforming from ordinary into the charismatic anti-hero, "[t]hat bad motherfucker called Stagger Lee" (Welberry and Dalziell, 2009).

Despite its emphasis on the material world and its more unpleasant qualities, Cave's ideology is not free from the sacred veneer of the jargon. He often professes the search for higher meaning of the everyday man. Cave's oeuvre is "expressly and throughout suffused with religious ideas, [and] uses religious ideas to examine existential issues of love and death, among many others" (2009). Unlike many of his critics, who see *Murder Ballads* as pure parody, Cave takes the role of chosen he-man quite seriously in this album. In an interview with Ohad Pishof, he portrays his vocation as determined by exterior and higher forces, seeing himself as the vehicle for the expression of universal truths. He even declares, "I feel I have very little control of where my songs are going" (Pishof, 2006). Whether this is part of his public persona is debatable. The interesting point is that Cave equates access to his tortured and violent imagination with proximity to the spiritual. He elucidates this relation through an allusion to Christ and the Pharisees. Cave argues Christ regarded the Pharisees as "enemies of the imagination, who actively blocked the spiritual flight of the people and kept them bogged down with theological nit-picking, intellectualism and law" (Cave, 1997). In contradistinction, Christ can relate to the human world through his immediate experience. In the *New Testament*, Cave finds inspiration to take on "a softer, sadder, more introspective voice" in his devotion to the image of Christ as a "ragged stranger," which can be seen as the model for his own created persona (1997). Through his relation to Christ, the artist constructs himself as a supernatural agent beyond the restraints of society with free reign to effect justice at all costs. This becomes more obvious in his discussion of the role of the artist vis-à-vis the serial killers in *Murder Ballads*. In answering whether there is a connection between the writer and the ruthless protagonists of the ballads, Cave states:

I would say that there is...What I do as an artist I think is a very spiritual thing. It's a way of elevating my life beyond normality and tawdriness, and I think that's basically what a lot of killers do. It's a kind of spiritual act, to kill, it adds a bit of meaning, a bit of quality to their

lives (Cave, 2006).

In "Stagger Lee," we catch a glimpse of the killer as redeemer, who provides transcendence to human subjects trapped in a life not worth living. Stagger Lee stands as the angel of the apocalypse, simultaneously judge and executioner. As a result, he does away with the "vermin" of society: the bartender, the local drunk and philanderer Billy Dilly, and the prostitute, "a broad called Nellie Brown[who] was known to make more money than any bitch in town." In "O'Malley's Bar," the hand of divine justice comes down mercilessly to liberate the soul from the body. The self-glorying killer describes himself as "I am tall and I am thin/Of an enviable height/And I've been known to be quite handsome/In a certain angle and in certain light." In contrast to his clean-cut figure, all his victims lack humanity and dignity: "poor" O'Malley's wife's sin consists of looking "raw and vicious;" her daughter was enchain to pulling "beers from dusk till dawn" as well as engaging in dubious sexual activities, "amongst the townsfolk she was a bit of a joke;" the fat man Vincent West is reduced to the semblance of a man, "A man become child." Moreover, the killer experiences a moment of spiritual affirmation with each kill, and as a result, he bears no grudge against his victims, but rather seeks their transformation. He presents the moment of the kill as one of almost saintly ecstasy through his use of religious symbolism. Hence, O'Malley's daughter "[...] sat shivering in her grief/ Like the Madonna painted on the church-house wall," "the bird-like Mr. Brookes" recalls the image of "Saint Francis and his sparrows," and the youthful Richardson metamorphoses into St. Sebastian pierced with arrows.

In locating the jargon of authenticity in Cave's work, we should play close attention to his view of life as one of powerlessness and nothingness which weighs man down or, as the killer in the "Curse of Millhaven" summarizes, is doomed from the start as "All God's children, they all gotta die." This is a pervasive element in his work that is also rooted in the Romantic tradition. In his 1985 song "Black Crow King," Cave presides over a fallen kingdom in which all subjects resemble stalks of corn. The position of King entraps the subject in inescapable doom. He "recognizes his audience's rooted and unchanging nature, [and] at the same time, is bound to remain with them, even when he is conscious that 'everybody's gone'" (Welberry and Dalziel, 2009). For Cave, the "woe is me" attitude represents the normal way to confront reality. As subjects of a world which God has left behind, artistic meditation on misery remains the sole consolation. Cave relishes taking on the role of the necessarily pathological social subject whose fate is determined *a priori*. Cave's deep voice and somber tone emphasize this vision of the world. In "Up Jumped the Devil" from his 1988 album *Tender Prey*, the subject is

thrown into the chaos of the world, impressed through the lyrics, "O my O my/ What a wretched life/ I was born on the day/ My poor mother died," and later, "O poor heart/ I was doomed from the start/ Doomed to play/ The villain's part/ I was the baddest Johnny/ In the apple cart/ My blood was blacker/ Than that of a dead nun's heart." In the song, the protagonist's evil nature is completely unmediated; he suffers from a general malady which he blames on the world. Through such a move, Cave asserts the manifestation of violence in the world as a necessary condition, fetishizing the criminal as the agent closest to the truth. The criminal merges with the Christ figure, rendering the material conditions of society as obstacles to happiness and pure identity. Virtue is not of this world. For Cave, criminality takes center stage as the universal condition with which one must constantly struggle. In his songs of doomed love and paralyzing guilt, "[d]eath is understood and embraced within this insight as both frightening and welcoming. It becomes the place of solace, or at least the portal into another place" (2009). The worshipping of death as the moment of transcendence denies the life of the body, rendering it impure. In his work, Cave closely ties embodiment to the oppressive mechanisms of the state, especially domesticity.

As a result, the tainted protagonists of Cave's songs long to find an unsullied pre-social realm by turning to an idealized image of nature. As we will see, while critics hail Cave for integrating the sacred and the profane, "the violence done to the corpse, the entanglement of innocence with darkly erotic drives," I will argue Cave's secular theology precisely consists of the strict separation of the sacred and the profane. This structure of belief works through a persistent denial of empirical reality and the precariousness and perishable condition of the human body, specifically the female body, that finds resolution for various social malaises only in a romanticized, highly idiosyncratic vision of death that returns the subject to nature (2009).

### **The Degraded Bride: Domesticity and Emasculation in "Song of Joy"**

A ballad is above all a narrative between characters and their audience that tells a story by allowing the action to unfold from the perspective of a mostly impartial teller (Atkinson, 2002). Although as a popular form of culture certain ballads moralize, this is not patently expressed in all murder ballads. There are cases in which the murderer gets away with the crime, but his sin is not forgotten or forgiven. Invoking Bakhtin's concept of the Carnivalesque, Atkinson claims the ballad's normative quality lies in its conscious subversion of the world of law and moral order to present it as threatening and chaotic

and thus in need of justice and retribution (2002). The murder is clearly marked as an act of transgression that eventually "outs." In addition, some murder ballads contain the element of supernatural retribution. The murderer escapes human systems of justice but is nevertheless punished through the physical manifestation of the victim, in the form of a corpse or ghost, who haunts the killer and exposes his/her guilt. This is the case with the bleeding corpse or the bleeding flower standing in for the corpse, with the blood acting as the index pointing to the murderer. Some of the traditional murder ballads, present the corpse as an embodied threat with agency and volition in its desire to take revenge upon the perpetrator. It marks the return of the abject, with all its polluting substances because not only does the corpse come back, but it refuses to be silenced, speaking through the leaking fluids of the body and accompanying the murderer to his death, especially when the latter "accidentally" perishes due to a sudden attack of fright.<sup>iii</sup> In this manner, the traditional murder ballad, even while upholding a double standard punishing female sexuality ("loose women" and innocent maidens are proportionally the targets) and promoting obedience to men, discourages arbitrary violence against women with the promise that one way or another, the murderer will face the consequences of his acts.

In *Murder Ballads*, Cave supplants the potential agency of the victim by installing a male character as an authoritarian source of truth who speaks for all the parties involved. He enacts the role of the dark and handsome predator who takes the lives of innocent women in order to save their purity. This part fits him like a glove and is one that he thoroughly enjoys. It represents the way he performs male sexual desire, traditionally associated with physical power and the higher social ranking of man over women. Towering at well over six feet tall, with a thin frame, pale skin and long, dark hair, he is indeed more like a rogue Don Juan than a Victorian gentleman, with all the sex appeal that comes with being the mysterious outsider. In contrast to this glorified vision of the masculine, Cave locates feminine virtue in passivity, with the female corpse as the most desirable representation of the ideal woman. Furthermore, he relegates ideal femininity to the realm of a romanticized portrayal of nature incompatible with reality. In identifying femininity with nature, he closes off the possibility of woman as an autonomous subject in the real world because for him, culture degrades love, entrapping and feminizing the male anti-hero in the skirts of domestic life. It comes as no surprise that most of his songs do not involve real fleshed-out women. Cave's corpse bride objectifies woman as ephemeral and disembodied, much in the style of Edgar Allan Poe's silent dead maiden, Annabel Lee. For Poe, the idealized relationship transforms into the bonding of souls lacking bodies - his more than hers as

he is the surviving party who gets to tell the tale - and the possessive male narrator eternally owns the ideal of Annabel Lee as "[...] neither the angels in heaven above/ Nor the demons under the sea/ Can ever dissever my soul from the soul/ Of the beautiful Annabel Lee" (Poe, 2004). Beauty, death and eternal nature provide the perfect ingredients to preserve ideal femininity; Annabel Lee is so "beautiful," as Poe repeats throughout the poem, precisely because she is dead and only exists as a reified memory of an actual woman, whose virtue is a consequence of her silence and immutability. In other words, she does not complain, desire or age. She forever remains in pubescent bliss and maidenhood.

In looking at Cave's work, it is crucial to identify ideological elements that inform his conception of male-female sexual relationships after the magical, otherworldly encounter with the ideal, virtuous woman wanes. What is the alternative to the innocent, youthful female beauty identified with virtue? For Cave, this seems to involve a degradation of the erotic relationship that comes about through the institution of the family and social pressures to conform into a middle class monotonous life. Domesticity not only turns the woman/wife/lover into a monstrous "other," but also emasculates the male partner, preventing him from fulfilling his ultimate *raison d'être*. As a result, Cave's narrators are able to erect a divide between the natural--the libido, nature, the beauty of the physical body, the path to spiritual transcendence, in opposition to the social-imprisonment; oppressive forces that obstruct identity; violence; banality; and punishment. The threat of social institutions to masculinity and the overcoming of this state through an act of transgression that only a higher force can understand comes up in "The Mercy Seat" from the album *Tender Prey*.

"The Mercy Seat" relates the confession of a man on death row. Although he never entirely divulges what his crime involved, clues in the text point to the act of murdering his wife. As in other Cave songs, the narrator addresses himself directly to the audience while engaged in a vertiginous state of meditation and spiritual search. "The Mercy Seat" presents an undoubtedly male perspective of domesticity. The protagonist is driven to violence by his suffocating marriage, portrayed through the symbol of the wedding band constraining his finger. Getting rid of the first set of shackles - family life - leads the murderer to imagine himself as a victim of yet another institution: the law. Cave's raging voice and exchange between whispering dialogue and song indicate the protagonist's immersion in spiritual trances and interpellates the listener in his plea for innocence. The listener succumbs to the candid confession, which takes the form of a prayer. Even though at the end, the narrator concedes "he told a lie" about being innocent, this statement carries little weight as in a higher realm of

justice, he feels he is truly unstained of wrongdoing. Rather, the circumstantial violence against his wife, who curiously remains unnamed, results from the uneasy need to integrate the libidinal drives of man with a culture aimed at suppressing man's connection to 'nature' and the true 'spiritual.' The protagonist is not so much concerned with his crime, which is barely hinted at, but with ascetic detachment from the binding structures of society. Hence, he likens himself to the figure of Jesus, seeing his face in his soup, describing him as an outsider but in turn as another everyday man (much like himself): "[...] Christ was born into a manger/ And like some ragged stranger/ Died upon the cross/ And might I say it seems fitting in its way/ He was a carpenter by trade."

Cave's protagonist glorifies his existence by leaving behind the empirical world and creating a self-contained reality in which he heroically finds redemption by transforming the negative experiences of death row and his execution in the electric chair into a way of answering his higher calling, no longer obstructed by either petty domesticity or the logic of the state. The renunciation of the real world as incompatible with true self-realization comes across when he states: "And in a way I'm yearnin'/ To be done with all this measurin' of proof/ An eye for an eye/ And a tooth for a tooth/ And anyway I told the truth/ And I'm not afraid to die." The protagonist welcomes death as the absolute moment of self-identity and closeness to God, likening the electric chair to "His throne made of gold." By seeing himself as God-like -- after all, his own face is conflated with the reflection of Christ in his soup -- the protagonist reveals his death as a necessary sacrifice that he must "man up" to, hence his repeated assertion "and I'm not afraid to die." Cave's narrator perniciously aestheticizes and abstracts a series of acts of violence, from the possible murder of his wife to the State punishing him with the death penalty, and holds them forth as sublime, the keys to his salvation and entrance into a world where his true role will be understood. In the moment of death, his "body is on fire/ And God is never far away." Fire here denotes the experience of ecstasy, much in the manner of the stigmatization of St. Francis, in which God speaks through the wounded body of man. The physical body is left behind because the protagonist looks forward to resurrection. Epiphany occurs through the Christian passion of his anticipated death, described as: "And like a moth that tries/ To enter the bright eye/ So I go shufflin' out of life/ Just to hide in death awhile." Death is only the transitory state of passing from the banality of the social world to the Kingdom of Heaven. "The Mercy Seat" promotes a philosophy emphasizing thrownness, violence and negativity as givens in the realm of the social. By neglecting to examine his troubled relationship with women and posing the conflict as that of the spiritual man against the secular state, Cave's protagonist justifies his

violent tendencies, overt misogyny and fanaticism, uncannily creating poetry out of the most horrific. Kouvaras sums up this last point quite succinctly when she argues these problematic aspects of the narrator's personality "[look] not quite so bad in [their] euphoric state [...] with such a unique and powerful sound-world" (Kouvaras, 2008).

"The Mercy Seat" helps us explain the persona Cave once again enacts in "Song of Joy" from *Murder Ballads*. I would say this is a more refined version of the character. In this case, the masculine hero is lucid and confident and gets away with the crime. Like "The Mercy Seat," "Song of Joy" utilizes confession to narrate a story and permeates it with similar ambiguity as to whether the protagonist is responsible for the crime. Whether the protagonist murders his wife and daughters is not as important as his presentation of the life of the household as the origin of the problem. "Song of Joy" takes an even more insidious tone toward justified violence against women because the alternative is the emasculation of the male character. Cave at first seems to follow one of the formulas of the murder ballad, a confession of a traumatic event that haunts the possible author of the crime. Although the song is about Joy, the speaker evades description of the day-to-day interaction between the married couple. The uncanny aspect of the song comes from its musical form. Like most Cave songs, it is voice led. Cave's voice stands as the source of narration as well as the physical presence of this threatening character. The background music, almost like that of a horror film setting up a scene of escalating suspense, increases the feeling of darkness and imminent danger which blends into the speaker's already eerie confession and the body of the voice. Like the self-centered speaker, the song has a regular, almost rigid structure. Cave utilizes a monotonic voice with limited ascension. The ascensions, accompanied by piano and cymbals, quickly return to the monotone. There is one voice and one dominant musical idea that repeats throughout the entire song. Cave is self-conscious about enunciation. He slowly pronounces every word, every detail of the tragic story, blocking the listener from getting lost in the melody and away from the lyrics.

Here, I wish to compare Cave's approach to another song about murder which has a completely different relation between the melody and the lyrics, the murder ballad 'Mack the Knife' in the context of American popular culture. 'Mack the Knife' has been cleansed of its darker roots through its translation into English. Originally a collaboration between composer Kurt Weill and dramatist Bertolt Brecht for the latter's 1928 *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Three-penny Opera*), the song has been decontextualized to the point that many Americans do not associate it with Brecht's musical, which tells the story of a rather grimy criminal underworld. It has been sung by

Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Frank Sinatra, Bobby Darin and Michael Bublé; all mainstream singers. The ballad describes the exploits of serial killer Mack aka "The Knife" in some detail. For instance, Mack's stabbing of his victims is depicted as "when that shark bites, with his teeth, babe/ Scarlet billows start to spread' and he leaves behind 'a body just oozin' life... eeek!" Mack kills at random, but has a significant number of female victims like Jenny Diver, Sukey Tawdry, Miss Lotte Lenya and old Lucy Brown. The question becomes why "Mack the Knife" can spread so inconspicuously and attain acceptance and popularity although it is a song about murder. Ironically enough, I have personally heard children humming the tune. It is in this comparison that we locate the element of the subversive in Cave.

"Mack the Knife," like other murder ballads, is not made to be closely examined, but rather integrated into popular culture as leading to pleasure and merry making. This occurs because these types of ballads are melody dominant, with the voiced lyrics disappearing into the overwhelming flow of the instrumental sound. In the case of "Mack the Knife," the percussion and piano regulate the structure and soften the impact of the lyrics, which almost feel like a lullaby. In most renditions, like that of Ella Fitzgerald, the singer's voice attains a playful quality that encourages the audience to mindlessly sing along to the tune. As such, the listener bypasses Mack's atrocities and falls into a trance driven by a predictable rhythmic structure. The voice does not threaten but teasingly strings along, curving over the instrumental sound and becoming engulfed in the melody. This is where Cave diverges from tradition and employs the power of his voice. His murder ballads differ because they do not attempt to give pleasure. In fact, the opposite is true. They paralyze the listener through the mesmeric monotone of Cave's whispering, raspy voice which emphasizes the lyrics over the melody. The instrumental portion of the song is subjected to the power of the thundering voice. The voice itself feels like an instrument of torture and captivity with little space for release. In "Song of Joy," the listener is subjected to a constant monologue with extremely brief instrumental diversions and hence, catches every detail of the crimes.

Cave's insistence on the confessional also emphasizes his mastery over the other musical elements as well as the listener. He captures the listener twice; in the song itself addressed to a stranger, and in the audience who take the position of the stranger forced to listen to the confession. The protagonist, formerly a family man himself, begins with by identifying with the oppressed, explicit in the introductory lyrics: "Have mercy on me, Sir/ Allow me to impose on you/ I have no place to stay/ And my bones are cold right through." He beguiles the listener by posing as a victim and offering to relate a story. He then takes control when he reveals it is his story in the

eighth line of the song. He painstakingly narrates the tragic events surrounding the death of his wife Joy and their three daughters. We begin with an image of Joy as the virtuous silent bride: "Ten years ago I met a girl named Joy/ She was a sweet and happy thing/ Her eyes were bright blue jewels." From the get-go, Joy figures as a possession, a thing with bright blue jewels that takes the narrator's fancy. However, Joy's joy and the love the protagonist feels become degraded, a process he projects onto the characterization of his wife and domestic life after they are married.

"Song of Joy" maximizes the edification of helplessness and death characteristic of the jargon of authenticity in Cave's motto: "But all things move toward their end/ All things move toward their end/ On that you can be sure." In other words, everyone is equally enslaved by their helplessness and death promises freedom both "natural" and divine. Why does Joy die? Where is her transgression? She, like the character of Judith in the fairy tale of Bluebeard, reminds the male protagonist of "his human rather than transcendental status" (McClary, 1991). She breaks through the façade of the powerful patriarch to reveal commonplace mortal vulnerability. This is the secret she must take to her grave as allowing its presence emasculates the male protagonist, who sees himself as poet and prophet. Once Joy evolves from of the ideal image of pubescent beauty and sexual innocence, she is bound to a tragic and highly gruesome end. The loss of beauty and innocence takes place naturally and without any action on the narrator's part, as far as he is concerned. Her fate is marked by her womanhood in the association of femininity with excess of emotion and irrationality. The narrator wakes up one morning to find his wife weeping for no apparent reason. Joy is not unlike the madwoman often removed in order for the male protagonist to reach self-fulfillment as the hero of the story. In many ways, she is just a physical obstacle in his higher quest for abstract meaning and spirituality. Her condition is conflated with her body, as evidenced from the lyrics: "She grew so sad and lonely/ Became Joy in name only/ Within her breast there launched an unnamed sorrow." We never hear Joy's part of the story because not only is she irrational, but also unable to utter a sound. Her embodied sorrow matter-of-factly leads to her bad end. For the narrator, this is destiny. Joy feels a premonition and, according to the speaker, can see her fate, "the heart of her final blood-soaked night."

Despite the narrator's evasion, we find several clues that explain Joy's fall from grace, all pointing to her transformation from youthful maiden to domestic wife and mother. Cave's speaker provides a bleak description of family life. The couple "then in quick succession [...] had babies one, two, three/ We called them Hilda, Hattie and Holly/ Their eyes were bright blue jewels/ And they were

quiet as a mouse." The protagonist does not seem to have affection for the mother or the three girls, equally objectifying them as blue jewels lacking the ability to speak. The mundane aspects of childbearing and daily stirrings of married life continue to deteriorate the romantic relationship, a failure projected onto Joy. We get the atmosphere of stagnant everydayness which demands corrective action. The narrator sternly expresses: "There was no laughter in the house [...] no wonder, people said, poor mother/ Joy's so melancholy." Like in "The Mercy Seat," domesticity and family life oppress the narrator who conflates this mode of being with femininity. The protagonist, who also identifies himself as a doctor, finds the cure to his family's pervading malaise: the removal of the physical obstacles in the form of mother and daughters (perhaps by his hand or the hand of another). His description of the crime resembles an autopsy report, a routine listing of the facts with little emotion or even shock, qualities we would expect from a widower exposed to such a violent crime:

Joy had been bound with electrical tape  
 In her mouth a gag  
 She'd been stabbed repeatedly  
 And stuffed into a sleeping bag  
 In their very cots my girls were robbed of their  
 lives  
 Method of murder the same as my wife's  
 Method of murder the same as my wife's.

It is no coincidence Joy is punished for her non-ideal womanhood through the very domesticity she embodies, killed with a kitchen knife, bound with a commonplace household fixer-upper and stuffed into a sleeping bag. The crime represents a further silencing of the barely existent female voice in this story. Even though all the women in the family are "as quiet as a mouse," the killer finds the need to place a gag in Joy's mouth. The degradation of the love relationship through the institution of the family coincides with a gruesome death for the woman as opposed to the image of eternal beauty we will later find in "Where the Wild Roses Grow." The profane is brought about in its opposition to the sacred through the lack of cleanliness of the crime scene and the stumbling idiocy of the police who fail their duty to avenge the crime. The narrator conjures a further image to articulate the crucial divide between society and nature characteristic of the jargon. In opposition to the mutilated corpses of Joy and her daughters in the domestic space, the narrator constructs the last loving image of his wife by removing her into the distant realm of nature with the image: "Farewell happy fields/ Where Joy forever dwells." This corresponds to Cave's tendency to associate virtuous femininity with nature throughout *Murder Ballads*, with the natural world figuring as a pre-social state of

grace in which women's bodies are left intact.

Joy's murder is not the most disturbing aspect of this narrative. "Song of Joy" captures the performance of an unrepentant possible murderer who lasciviously seduces his listener with the credo of masculine liberation from the cult of domesticity. The protagonist-as-performer becomes obvious about halfway through the song, when he gains extreme satisfaction in finding the listener has his attention. The crimes alluded to are elevated into the realm of poetry. Our narrator, who self-consciously quotes Milton's *Paradise Lost* in his description of Joy and at the end of his story, proudly divulges the murderer is still at large, aggrandizing his criminal oeuvre with the remark, "It seems he has done many many more/ Quotes John Milton on the walls in the victim's blood/ The police are investigating at tremendous cost." Here, we notice the emphasis on the number of crimes through the sudden vertiginous turn in the background music and Cave's heightened vocal performance, which then wails down into tonal resolution at the end of the song. At no point do we find grief, making it more likely for him to have been the killer. In his excitement, the once emasculated male divulges he has managed to find a calling, raising him above the rest of society. Killer-poet-performer conflate in a celebration of unbound masculinity. Once Joy has been removed, the protagonist finds freedom. He has "left [his] home" and "[drifts] from land to land" at one with the more unpredictable and destructive forces of nature, depicted as "Outside the vultures wheel/ The wolves howl/ The serpents hiss." In the end, we get the sense his narrative has ensnared his listener, the family man whose masculinity is now in question. Is the narrative in "Song of Joy" a sermon leading to epiphany and conversion with the promise of liberation from the shackles of domestic life? The last thing the protagonist asks his listener is 'are you beckoning me in?' Given the potential killer's self-rendering as the Messianic promoter of freedom and status change, the word 'beckon' might imply more of a spiritual summoning rather than a simple offer of charity on the part of the 'good' family man. This is coupled with the apotheosis of piano and choral that prolongs the force of Cave's voice, the roaring voice of the divine, until the end of the song.

### **The Corpse Bride: "Natural" Female Virtue in "Where the Wild Roses Grow"**

"Where the Wild Roses Grow" can be viewed as a modern rendition of the *Liebestod*, the love-death, attributed to Wagner's music, especially in the opera *Tristan and Isolde*. The love-death consists of the predictability of a beautiful feminine death often without any specific causation. Its pleasure lies in the musical

chromaticism expressing the pain and affliction of the dying woman through ‘intensified sounds [that] tear the soul as they rise’ and powerful descents which create the illusion of real moans and struggle (Clément, 1988). Catherine Clément argues that the expectation of the love-death as well as its glorious musical texture, “makes the idea of death trite, then familiar, desirable, tamed” (1988). As such, we impatiently wait for this moment without considering it constitutes a murderous transgression and/or unjust punishment of the female character as in Bizet’s *Carmen* or Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. Unlike “Song of Joy,” “Where the Wild Roses Grow” is melody dominant, with a sensuous catchy tune that makes the murder of Elisa Day pleasurable and “simply destined to be.” This ballad is the most popular on the album in terms of consumer interest and as such, replete with the jargon of authenticity. Unlike “Song of Joy,” this song’s structure is aesthetically pleasing, non-confrontational and predictable.

In “Where the Wild Roses Grow,” Cave takes the role of the seducer in search for the perfect woman: the corpse bride. He crowns his achievement by conjuring a marriage scene in the midst of the natural world where he tenderly confines his dead love to a bed of wild roses by the riverside. As far as the tradition of the murder ballad, Cave is not introducing anything new, but following the stereotype of the poor, guileless girl who is seduced, killed and abandoned. In this case, she comes back from the dead through her posthumous memory in the form of an indirect narrative with her killer, but the crime remains unpunished and the murderer at large and seemingly undisturbed by his actions. Her posthumous vocal presence exacerbates the atrocity of the crime as she does not realize the reason for her fate or even the way it occurred. It is indeed a sad feminine ending characteristic of the love-death. The song, a duet with Australian pop artist Kylie Minogue, at first appears to attempt to tell two versions of the story of a murder, one by the victim and the other by the victimizer. The piece begins with a harmonious melody of violins and Minogue’s voice softly posing a question: “They call me the wild rose/ But my name was Elisa Day/ Why they call me it I do not know/ For my name was Elisa Day.” This refrain will then serve as the chorus throughout the entire song. In its first iteration, even though the female voice comes to prominence, one can hear Cave’s masculine baritone in the background, foreshadowing his omnipotence over the narrative. The repetition of the chorus pervasively flaunts the fact that at no point in the story will the corpse by the river, transformed into the preserved wild rose, be reconciled with the flesh-and-blood female persona of Elisa Day. The clash between masculinity and femininity is quite potent. While Minogue caresses the lyrics with a chromatic set of slippery ascending and descending movements, Cave’s voice retains the raspy rigidity we

find in his other ballads, preventing the tune from flowing freely. This vocal quality gives the sensation that the protagonist feels apathy when he relates his part of the story.

“Where the Wild Roses Grow” is about the replacement of a newly sexually awakened woman with a stereotypical feminine figuration of purity forever preserved in the image of the ‘Wild Rose.’ The image erases Elisa Day. As such, all parties -- Elisa, the murderer and the listener -- conspire to dissolve her empirical existence into the fetishized aesthetic icon that stands in for the real woman, the “Wild Rose” being the name by which she will always be known. In the course of the story the male protagonist makes us see Elisa through his totalizing vision of the beautiful woman destined to die, emphasizing his role as the agent of the plot with the lyrics: “From the first day I saw her I knew she was the one/ She stared in my eyes and smiled/ For her lips were the color of the roses/ That grew down the river so bloody and wild.” From the start, he envisions Elisa Day as something other, as a piece that belongs to nature because of her feminine essence; hence, her lips immediately recall the color of the roses. “She was the one” foreshadows the murder, as indeed we are listening to an album titled *Murder Ballads*. Her demise is clear; it is just a matter of time before it occurs. Cave, utilizing the jargon, equates feminine purity with the untouched image of nature growing wild and unhampered by social life.” Nature acts as a given, pre-social state to which the tormented social outsider longs to return in complete innocence. The obstinacy to separate nature from society is best captured when the protagonist reveals Elisa to be ‘more beautiful than any woman I’d seen’ and immediately collapses this vision with the image of the roses, ‘So sweet and scarlet and free.’

One of the more curious elements in “Where the Wild Roses Grow” consists in Elisa’s mimicry and support of the murderer’s vision. Her narrative tells us little about herself and more about the idealized feminine image of her male courter, who performs all the actions and assigns her the role of spectator to the events of her demise. She falls under the spell of the jargon of authenticity which the male narrator professes. The murderer forcibly and self-confidently “knocked on my door and entered the room,” comforts Elisa in “his sure embrace” and metaphorically takes over her body with the precision of a surgeon: “He would be my first man, and with a careful hand/ He wiped at the tears that ran down my face.” By the second encounter, Elisa is already transformed into ‘a single red rose.’ The narrative proceeds only through the purposeful actions of the male protagonist who can quickly move the plot along towards its apotheosis and the dissolution of Elisa’s subjectivity. In answer to his request to give him her loss and her sorrow, she obediently nods her head, lays on the bed

and the next day, acquiesces to follow him to the place where the wild roses grow. This action contains several insinuations. Elisa has become a sexualized woman by giving herself to the mysterious stranger. The seduction at this point is mutual. But this would endow her with agency and mastery over the sexual desire of the male, which is exactly what the protagonist wishes to prevent. When Elisa no longer occupies a secondary ornamental function, she, like her predecessors in opera, "end[s] up punished - fallen, abandoned, or dead" (1988).

Cave utilizes the love-death motif quite blatantly. Elisa is constructed as overtly naïve and provides little resistance to the demands of the male protagonist. It is as if her death makes perfect sense. In fact, she perishes without realizing the more gruesome aspects of his actions upon her body. It is a beautiful death that fulfills the anticipated result of the love-death. Elisa is powerless to either reflect on or revise the story, reinforced by the audience's superior knowledge of the events, mainly furnished by the murderer. Elisa's last image consists of hearing "a muttered word/ As he knelt above me with a rock in his fist." The male narrator conquers the woman by killing her. Musically, Cave's deep voice narrates the murder and last details of the story, creating the absolute version of the narrative. In a modulated voice that shifts little in pitch, the murderer divulges his philosophy and the reason Elisa must die:

On the last day I took her where the wild roses  
grow  
And she lay on the bank the wind light as a thief  
And I kissed her goodbye, said, "All beauty must  
die,"  
And lent down and planted a rose between her  
teeth.

The murderer justifies his actions by appealing to a preservation of the authentic that can only be achieved through the glorification of an ideal natural state. "All beauty must die" follows the Christian concept that pure "goodness" does not belong in the banality of the real world. The killer's actions are imputed onto nature's own volition by rendering the wind as a thief who patiently lays in wait to take the corpse to the realm of immortality as an image of beauty arrested in time. Natural determination acts as a tool that places the male narrator as unselfishly fulfilling a higher universal cause by sacrificing his emotions, in this case the sexual desire and perhaps even love he might have felt for Elisa Day. By elevating death to the status of the sacred and completely bypassing the problem of the putrefaction of the corpse, the mystified rose substitutes the person of Elisa and whitewashes the act of violence upon her body as well as the suppression of the female voice. The closing of the song brings us back to the beginning with

the descent of chromaticism to the tonal in small intervals until the competing instrumental melody disappears and only the slowly fading vocals of Elisa are heard. She finds no answer to her question. It is a terrible feminine ending: a failed narrative condemning her to a position of eternal ignorance and disempowerment.

But this bleak image of the female's fatal fate is not the end of the story of "Where the Wild Roses Grow." The music video for the song, starring Cave and Minogue, presents a rather different power hierarchy between the sexes. Minogue first appears in the midst of a field of wild red roses with a luminous white gown looking straight into the camera, speaking and addressing the viewer with her seductive gaze and full crimson lips. Her body is fluid and blends with the surroundings. The viewer is presented with a second image of Minogue's body submerged in water, still and signifying she is dead. Nonetheless, she speaks again and defiantly looks at the camera when relating her part of the story. Minogue's face is in extreme close up. The *corpus delicti* returns to life to confront her killer. Even as the figure of Cave touches her submerged body, her opened eyes continue to accusingly stare at him. While in the album, we receive most of the story in the words of the male protagonist, in the video we hear them, but Cave seldom sings. In contrast to Minogue's lithe and fluid body, Cave stumbles around awkwardly, rubbing his face or kneeling by the river as if he were incapable of further motion. Cave rarely looks into the camera and repeatedly hides his face in his hands. Rather than the seductive lover, we have this clumsy, Frankenstein-like monster trampling about, out of place in the ambience of the natural world.

Feminine sexuality is heavily emphasized throughout the video. Minogue's fiery eyes express pure sensuality as does her full mouth, highlighted by the crimson lips against her pale skin. Moreover, as she is submerged in water, a snake undulates through her body, caressing her crotch. The prototype of the snake signals sexual desire as well as temptation. It also marks the fall of man through his submission to the request of the snake, doubled by Eve's curiosity, to eat the apple of embodied experience and knowledge in the story of Adam and Eve. With this allusion, Cave can actually be seen more as the victim of the seduction than the victimizer. The last two images of the video reinforce female authority. Minogue once again occupies the field of roses, directly addressing the viewer with voice and gaze. The final scene pushes Cave out of the frame, with an extreme close up of the woman's face at death, still with opened eyes that continue to torment her killer. It is not until Cave's hand places a rose between her teeth and closes her eyes that she no longer confronts us, although the luminosity of her skin signals liveliness rather than stiffness and death, qualities best reserved for Cave's performance. It is he who lacks life and desire, almost

like an automaton, going through the same physical motions over and over again. The video undermines the perceived misogynist message of the song because of Minogue's authoritative glance, graceful performance, ease of motion and physical expression of sexual desire through her voice, gaze and body. Cave, the doomed lover, is impotent, even unable to directly face the viewer to tell his part of the story. The female body triumphs over a rigid masculinity that is at odds with the bounty of the natural landscape Cave's jargon often cherishes as the pre-social, untainted sanctuary leading to freedom from the shackles of authority and the domestic space.

## CONCLUSION

### Is Death the End?

As much as critics and devoted fans insist *Murder Ballads* constitutes "a deliciously macabre parody of British Romantic culture," I believe the album portrays a secularized theology that feeds on turning the negative into the sublime and meaningful, endowing the will to end life and suffer death with a higher purpose (Welberry and Dalziell, 2009). Cave, like Heidegger, finds resolution in the concept of Being-towards-death. Through obsessive meditation on the passing of love and beauty and blind faith in an abstract beyond, the subject who anticipates death finds a release from lostness, "liberated in such a way that for the first time once can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead [...] Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one's tenaciousness to whatever existence once reached" (Heidegger quoted in Adorno, 1973). Nonetheless, this persona is a performance Cave cannot pull off all of the time, especially when his body rather than voice is present to carry the message of the jargon, as in the music video for "Where the Wild Roses Grow."

In fact, if overt parody exists in some form in *Murder Ballads*, it appears in the album's last song, the cover of Bob Dylan's "Death is Not the End." The song, seemingly life affirming, contains a "We are the World" type of structure, with various artists such as Anita Lane, Kylie Minogue, P.J. Harvey and Shane MacGowan as well as Cave singing to a harmonious piano-led tune. In "Death is Not the End," the only song lacking actual death and thus concluding the album, the voices superficially mumble the words, without the frenzied devotion and self-assurance exhibited in other Cave songs about death such as "Stagger Lee," "Song of Joy" and even the apocalyptic vision of "O'Malley's Bar." The song implies sickly conformism that denies the very message it promotes. In answer to having all dreams vanishing, no place in which to seek comfort, or vainly searching for a

law abiding citizen, the lyrics urge the listener to "just remember that death is not the end." But as we have seen, for Cave, there are worse things in life than death, especially the degradation of love through the monotony of conjugalility and domestic life.

The popular appeal of *Murder Ballads* lies in its reliance on the jargon of authenticity and thus perfectly recalls the nature affirming, pessimistic sensibility prevalent in Western culture as a remnant of Romanticism. The album targets the illusory unified middle class spellbound by the jargon, exploiting the failure-bound quest for purity of spirit and absolute truth in an increasingly chaotic world which denies the possibility of redemption. *Murder Ballads* stands by the status quo, persistently upholding a sexual double standard that denies women voice, will or volition. In the end, and despite some elements of the subversive, especially in the use of voice and the confessional, Cave infects us with a theologically based approach to life that justifies the murder of pure, beautiful women as a natural condition because it cannot imagine an alternative to the climax of a romantic relation between a man and a woman once the sense of novelty begins to fade. Thus, every manufactured statement of this jargon whether in Adorno's time or in contemporary popular culture, must be literally illumined and buttressed with layers of meaning to the point of kitschy suffusion and incessant repetition of old and unchanging bourgeois clichés.

## REFERENCES

- Adorno TW (1973).*The Jargon of Authenticity*. Evanston: Northwestern UP.
- Atkinson D (2002).*The English Traditional Ballad: Theory, Method and Practice*. Burlington: Ashgate,
- Cave N (1997)."The Flesh Made Word."King Ink II. London: Nick Cave Online.
- Cave N (2006) "Murder, He Said." Rolling Stone (Australia), Nick Cave Online.
- Clément C (1988).*Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Trans. by Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Cohen A (1973). *Poor Pearl, Poor Girl: The Murdered-Girl Stereotype in Ballad and Newspaper*.Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Dunsby J, Whittall A (1988).*Music Analysis in Theory and Practice*. New Haven: Yale UP.
- Friedwald W (2002).*Stardust Melodies: The Biography of Twelve of America's Most Popular Songs*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002.
- Gummere FB (1907).*The Popular Ballad*.Boston: Houghton, Miffling and Company.
- Kouvaras L (2008)."Being 'In Tune with the Workings of Society': Violence, Maleness, and Two 'Touching Little

- Ballads," Radical Musicology 3, no pagination.
- McClary S (1991). Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, & Sexuality (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).
- McEvoy E (2007). "Now, Who Will Be the Witness/When You're All Too Healed to See?": The Sad Demise of Nick Cave." Gothic Studies 9(1):79-88.
- Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (1996). Murder Ballads. Mute Records.
- Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds (1988). Tender Prey. Mute Records.
- Nietzsche F (1989). On the Genealogy of Morals and *Ecce Homo*. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.
- Pishof O (2006). "Interview from Israeli Newspaper Yediot Ahronot." Nick Cave Online.
- Poe EA (2004). The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Ed. by G.R. Thompson. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Share, S director (2001). If I Should Fall from Grace: The Shane MacGowan Story. Bórd Scannán na hÉireann, Emdee 2000 Productions and TG4.
- Van Parys B (2006). "Nick Cave's Murder Ballads, Review." Rollingstone.com.
- Welberry K, Dalziel T eds. (2009). Cultural Seeds: Essays on the Work of Nick Cave. Burlington: Ashgate.

---

<sup>i</sup> Here one particular band comes to mind. Mötley Crüe frequently panders to the "romantic" fantasies of their lady fans with "softer" ballads.

<sup>ii</sup> For a discussion of female identity, multiplicity and playfulness, see Luce Irigaray (1985). *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. by Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985: 165-67, 250.

<sup>iii</sup> For a definition of the abject as a source of power, see Julia Kristeva (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982: 2-3.