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Hearing Round Corners

Nick Cave and the Philosophy of Music

Nick Cave and the philosophy of music—is that not an incongruous and improbable pairing? Possibly, but that is precisely what I propose to undertake: an interpretation of Cave’s entire opus through the ears of Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of music. Why Bloch? There is a deep affinity between Bloch and Cave. Bloch combines philosophical rigour, Marxist analysis, a thorough interest in religion, especially the Bible, and an arresting approach to music. The first three elements of his work may be reasonably well-known, albeit not as well as they should be, but Bloch’s philosophy of music remains one of the hidden gems of his work. As for the affinity with Cave, they both deal with what may be called the “afterlives” of the Bible, and Christianity more generally, deploying themes, reworking them, creating new and fascinating conjunctions. Further, that affinity relies on a deeper appreciation, a hearing around corners, in order to gain the sense that through their very modes of expression, their musical outlook, intensity and hope, they come close indeed. Above all, they share an appreciation of both the theological and utopian, or theo-utopian dimensions of music.

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There is an intrinsically creative aesthetic which not only comments but is spontaneous, speculative. It is only in the latter's interpretation that truly "absolute" music is established, that the envisioned, utopian castle of music reveals itself.

ERNST BLOCH

The best fucking band in the universe.

CHRIS BAILEY

NICK CAVE and the philosophy of music—is that not an incongruous and improbable pairing? Possibly, but that is precisely what I propose to undertake in this study: an interpretation of Cave's entire opus through the ears of Ernst Bloch's philosophy of music. Why Bloch? Apart from my own attraction to Bloch—he is one of the few philosophers who seduces me, who gets my juices flowing, who continues to excite with a startling insight—there is a deep affinity between Bloch and Cave. I should point out that Bloch combines philosophical rigour, Marxist analysis, a thorough interest in religion, especially the Bible, and an arresting approach to music. The first three elements of his work may be reasonably well-known,¹ albeit not as well as they should be, but Bloch's philosophy of music remains one of the hidden gems of his work. But what of the affinity I suggested between him and Cave? To begin with, they both deal with what may be called the "afterlives" of the Bible, and more generally Christianity, deploying themes, reworking them, creating new and fascinating conjunctions. Further, that affinity relies on a deeper appreciation, a hearing around corners, in order to gain the sense that through their very modes of expression, their musical outlook, intensity and hope, they come close indeed. Above all, they share an appreciation of both the theological and utopian—or theo-utopian—dimensions of music, a crucial feature of the analysis that follows.

And why Nick Cave? He is not a mainstream musician, nor indeed a mainstream novelist, poet, film screenwriter or playwright. He is not very well known in that increasingly insular and fearful place between Canada and Mexico, the United States of America (although the Grinderman albums are making inroads there).² That is to say, the claim, made by Chris Bailey of The Saints, one of the originators of punk (while introducing Cave on Goat Island, Sydney in 2008), that Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds is the "best fucking band in the universe" needs a couple of words of justification. I might

¹ See Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 1–56.

² Grinderman, *Grinderman*, 2007, ANTI-; Grinderman, *Grinderman 2*, 2010, ANTI-.

begin to answer the question by observing that Cave remains one of the most original and arresting of alternative musicians in the last three decades, from leadership in the punk wave of the late seventies and early eighties to the unique avant-garde movements that followed. But what interests me about Cave is not merely that he is a musician and songwriter, but that his artistic creation also includes novels, poetry, film scripts, plays, lectures, and the occasional short story. Further, all of that creative work is infused with arresting reinterpretations of the Bible and theology more generally. Obviously, that feature is crucial for a study such as this.

The final introductory question concerns reception history, or rather the reshaping of that term that this article implicitly attempts. I do not set out to engage in the traditional sense of reception history. The problem here is that this term relies on a spurious distinction drawn from German historical-critical biblical scholarship: one first engages in exegesis of the original biblical text, usually with three steps: translation, paraphrase (restating the key moments of the text in question) and exegesis proper, the “leading out” of the meaning of the text. Needless to say, such an approach produces the intractable assumption that there is one true meaning of the text, a meaning that may be identified by this singular method. After exegesis is reception history (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) and the history of the text’s use or effect (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), although the latter is usually subsumed within the former. This reception history is understood as secondary to the originary text and its exegesis, in that reception history may be lumped all those other approaches, like feminist, Marxist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic, ideological, queer and so on, all of which are supposedly anachronistic (without seeing that historical-critical “exegesis” itself is just as anachronistic, since it developed in a historically specific period well after the Bible was written). As will soon become apparent, the approach taken here differs strongly from such methodological assumptions, particularly the understanding that any interpretation of the text outside exegesis by biblical scholars is secondary, especially the way the Bible is interpreted in art, literature, film, politics or music. For these reasons, my study of Cave and the philosophy of music is, I would hope, a more creative form of reception history that partakes in the reconfiguring of the term itself. That is, I simply take Cave as offering yet other interpretations, which are as valid (or not!) as those who seek to maintain the fortresses of biblical criticism or theological interpretation. Far more interesting are the patterns of interpretation in which Cave engages, the creative reconstructions of biblical motifs, especially in the musical forms he employs,

such as the lament (in which the Bible does not have priority), rather than any concern for the legitimacy or otherwise of those reconstructions.

Hearing around corners

I begin with a concise statement of Bloch's philosophy of music, with an ear cocked for what is relevant for my analysis of Cave: in the bravura "Philosophy of Music" section that opens his *Spirit of Utopia*, Bloch offers a thorough retelling of the belated story of music by emphasising its very human nature, recounting that story in terms of the basic category of the note and its hangers-on (hearing, voice, song, dance and rhythm), listening with a philosophical and theo-utopian ear that attempts to hear around corners.

Let me say a little more about each of these carefully weighted terms in this brief description. To begin with, Bloch's philosophy of music is a thorough retelling of the story of music. Now, at one level, Bloch assumes that music itself does not have a narrative and that it cannot be represented in conventional terms. So writes David Drew in his detailed introduction to the English translation of Bloch's musical essays: "it is essential to his philosophical purpose that music is imageless and without narrative form,"³ precisely so that Bloch may assume that music is philosophy, requiring the merest gloss and clarification. True enough, at least as far as this position enables Bloch to avoid the narrative pull of those forms he favours, such as song, fugue, sonata, and opera. However, at another level Bloch offers a profound retelling of the story of music, now in terms of the twisting fortunes of the note and the song.

More on that in a moment, since first I wish to reprise the second phrase: the story of music is a belated one. Although he later qualifies the point,⁴ Bloch argues that it is crucial for understanding music that it appears lately, as one untimely born: "The Persians, Chaldeans and Egyptians, the Greeks and schoolmen, *all of them without any music worth mentioning*."⁵ Only in

³ David Drew, "Introduction: From the Other Side: Reflections on the Bloch Centenary," in *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, by Ernst Bloch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), xxv.

⁴ In *Principle of Hope*, Bloch modifies his earlier bold statement, noting the contributions to musical theory (but not practice) of Pythagoras and then later Boethius (Ernst Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 213–14).

⁵ Ernst Bloch, *Essays on the Philosophy of Music*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 136.

the last few centuries, and especially—I would add—since the explosion of the myriad forms of rock music since the 1950s, has music come into its own as a central and complex cultural form (Cave of course is part of this late flourishing). Why? Not only does it step into the role of a seemingly fading religion, but the lateness of music gives it a uniquely dialectical role in the anticipation of utopia, for it both negates and transforms, or rather sublates (*Aufhebung*) the hope embodied in religion. So too with Cave: in fact, for Cave music and religion are intrinsically bound up with one another, so much so that I begin to imagine that Bloch's dialectical analysis seems as though it were written for the treatment that follows.

Further, Bloch never tires of emphasising that music is a distinctly human activity. Known only through that most embedded of sense receptors—the ear—and manifested first as a listening to oneself, music is what we would now call a very human construct. For Bloch, this means that the building blocks of music are—after the note—voice, song and the dance in which rhythm first manifests itself. But it also means that Bloch opposes any argument for the mathematical, supra-human and divine (Pythagoras and his myriad successors) existence of music, whether of spheres, planets or angels; or rather, he reads these in a dialectical fashion that enhances intimate human creativity in and through music. In other words, in that old opposition between technique and interpretation, between written score and performed piece, Bloch sides with the latter while seeking to transform the former. This also means that any analysis of music must resort primarily to the human act of listening rather than technical analysis of scores, for only in this way can we hear around corners (see more below). It seems to me obvious, but it is worth pointing out that in many cases with rock the score follows the performed piece, written after the fact and not as a primary moment of creativity; the musical piece emerges first in late-night strumming and humming. Once performed and accepted by listeners, the score appears late, demanded by those who wish to know how to play the piece.

I have already mentioned the pivotal role of the note in Bloch's philosophy, as indeed its fellow-travellers on the journey (voice, song, dance, and rhythm). The note follows a varied and twisting path; or rather it cuts a very new path through what is for Bloch a mostly European collection of musical forms and a German collection of musicians. In order to surpass his very narrow focus, I also seek out the shape of his argument rather than its content, for what Bloch does with his dialectical readings of the fugue and sonata, or with Bach, Beethoven and Wagner, is to recast thoroughly

the story of music so that in transforming its past the future begins to look decidedly different and more hopeful. In what follows, I set out to follow the note's own fascinating if diverse path in Nick Cave's work, although I do so in light of a specific concern of Bloch: the song. Why the song? Music begins, argues Bloch, with listening to our bodies, with noticing its trembling and twitching desire to dance, but also our love of singing, of singing to ourselves. The hum, whistle, tapping foot and nodding head are at the origins of music. In other words, since music is a thoroughly human affair, the note is embodied above all in the song. Now, Bloch will go on in his great retelling to distinguish between: a) singing-to-oneself, which is manifested in the dance and in chamber music; b) the uniform song (*geschlossenes Lied*), the secular version of which is the oratorio (with which Bloch spends relatively little time), while the sacred one is the fugue; c) the open-ended song (*offenes Lied*), where we find the sonata, Beethoven and Bruckner, the transcendent opera, the symphony and Wagner.⁶ Of course, the three are dialectically related, with singing-to-oneself as a form that is *constitutive*, the uniform song as an *impinging* type of song, expecting something more not so that it can be discarded but be transformed, and the open-ended song as a *fulfilment* that draws the other two forms into itself, realising their potential and transforming them in the process (*Aufhebung*). When I first read Bloch's philosophy of music and listened (again) to Cave's work, I at first thought that this particular argument of Bloch was the least useful, that the types of song were tied to his own very German situation. Yet, by the time I had made my way through three decades or more of Cave's music, it was precisely this analysis that provided me with some specific tools. So I began to distinguish between the anarchic or discordant song, the hymn (and its related form, the lament), the sinister song, and the dialectical song, all of which relate to one another in a pattern that I describe as a—distinctly musical—search for redemption.

Three items remain in my brief statement of Bloch's philosophy of music: he listens with a philosophical and theo-utopian ear, all the while striving to hear around corners. The first is obvious, especially in light of my earlier point that Bloch—the philosopher—sees music as philosophy in and of itself, needing but a touch-up here and a gloss there. However, Bloch's philosophical interest has a particular curve, for his lifelong pursuit was for

⁶ Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 14–15; Ernst Bloch, *Zur Philosophie der Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 22–23.

a philosophy of hope, seeking not only to discover within the existing, albeit limited parameters of philosophy its own irrepressible utopian drive, but also to reconstruct philosophy with an opening to utopia.⁷ Hence the “utopian ear,” but theo-utopian? As any reader of Bloch’s “Philosophy of Music” soon discovers, theology is never far from the surface. And when Bloch comes to close the various sections of the work on music, particularly the work as a whole, theology comes into play, explicitly, heretically, apocalyptically, in what I like to call his theo-utopian flourishes.

More than one commentator has become uncomfortable with this theological Bloch, preferring to see such flourishes (elsewhere in his work, for few have commented on the “Philosophy of Music”) as unfortunate slips or at best peripheral rhetoric.⁸ I cannot disagree more and cannot emphasise enough how important theology is for understanding Bloch’s work as a whole, let alone his musical reflections⁹—again the curious connection between Bloch and Cage shows itself, for theology is central for understanding Cage’s work as well. This theo-utopian ear has two dimensions. First, Bloch is astute enough to realise that the Bible and theology are laced with utopian themes, especially those relating to the last days, the eschaton and salvation, whether individual and collective, themes that he is keen to appropriate and reshape in a utopian direction. Secondly, we must not forget that Bloch saw music picking up the mantle of religion, a mantle that had slipped to the ground with the onset of modernity and secularism. So it should come as no surprise that eschatological themes from theology infuse his philosophy of music, for music functions as the *Aufhebung* of theology itself (once again, such a description will turn out to be apposite to Cage himself).

Finally, what does hearing around corners mean? Simply put, it is an intuitive grasp of the deeper urges and drives of music, well beyond analysing scores, techniques of production, performance and recording, or assiduously learning the “rules” of musical (dis)harmony. For Bloch, that hearing is, as we have seen, distinctly utopian, dialectical and theological. So it will not do

⁷ Bloch, *Principle of Hope*; Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, vol. 5, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985); Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Ernst Bloch, *Geist der Utopie, Zweite Fassung*, vol. 3, Ernst Bloch Werkausgabe (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1985).

⁸ John Miller Jones, *Assembling (Post)modernism: The Utopian Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995); Wayne Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch* (London: Macmillan, 1982); Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁹ One may usefully consult Boer, *Criticism of Heaven*, 1–56.

to analyse what musicians say about their own work, or to rest with criticising Bloch for his obvious lacks concerning musical history, theory and technique (some of which he sought to correct in his later work), or to challenge his interpretations of composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Wagner, or indeed—as I am inclined to do—to castigate him for a very European and especially German focus (both of them anomalies within world music). Instead, the specifics become the means to a deeper insight into the very workings of music, requiring what he calls a “clair-hearing” in interpretation—*Hellhören*, a play on *Hellsehen*, clairvoyance.¹⁰ Elsewhere he calls it a “metaphysics of divination and utopia [*Metaphysik von Ahnung und Utopie*].”¹¹ But this also means that Bloch’s approach is far more amenable to analysing material seemingly at some distance from what he does analyse—in my case, the varied collection of music created by Nick Cave.

Concerning the Wandering Path of the Note, or, Forms of the Song

The nub of my argument may be stated briefly: the basic form of the song in Cave’s work is the anarchic or discordant song (even though he worked hard to discover this form), but he attempts to resolve the internal tensions of this song through two main approaches and a few sidelines: one is the hymn and the lament (and then also a delightful perversion which I call the sinister song), and the other is the dialectical song. Always tempted by the hymn, I suggest that musical redemption is achieved—always partially—only through the dialectical garage song, in which the former anarchic song is allowed full reign. Listening with a theo-utopian ear, I suggest that these tensions and the effort to overcome them constitute the musical shape of Cave’s search for redemption.

We will soon immerse ourselves in the detail of more than three decades of music, so let me at the outset outline the major features of each type of song in which the note manifests itself in Cave’s work.¹² The anarchic song, found almost entirely with Cave’s band The Birthday Party and a little with The Boys Next Door and The Bad Seeds, is best described as the note under

¹⁰ Bloch, *Philosophie der Musik*, 163. The translation “visionary hearing” is perhaps as close as English might get to this sense, but it still does not capture *Hellhören* (Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 138).

¹¹ Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 131; Bloch, *Philosophie der Musik*, 154.

¹² Each of these types of song may leak into one another, so that hybrid forms often emerge (hence the regular appearance of “often,” “usually,” and “mostly” in my account).

internal attack, engaged in civil war or class struggle. Here the song fully exploits its closeness to noise,¹³ pushing with some effort to glorious anarchic breakdown. This is of course the punk note, for the early Cave was part of what was then (in the late 1970s and early 80s) the refreshing moment known as punk. Closely related, to the extent that I usually take it as part of the anarchic song, is the discordant song: defined by the note under tension, now we find the song pulled in all directions, often embodied in the various instruments of the band and the voice, but at times the tensions are manifested within each of these zones. The differences between the anarchic and discordant song is that in the former the bass line is caught up enthusiastically in the mayhem, while in the latter the bass usually tries to anchor the song, sometimes with success and at others without; the former applies mostly to *The Birthday Party*, while the latter is found with *The Bad Seeds*.

The major new direction in the twisting path of the note, as it moves from the tent of one song to another, is the hymn: characterised by a noticeably dominant keyboard, often simply a piano or organ,¹⁴ and a muted bass line, the hymn is sung slowly, accompanied in a way that recalls a choir—or, if one prefers a more democratic bent to religious music, the congregation—and is more conventionally harmonic. With comprehensive and intimate listening (so much so that the music seems to inhabit every corner and cavity of one's head), the hymn comes through clearly as a melodious counter to the anarchic song. A sub-group of the hymn is the lament—with its own deep biblical heritage in the Psalms, prophetic texts and above all the collection in the Hebrew Bible known as Lamentations—which is virtually the same as the hymn, except that the drawn-out note falls, again and again, at the end of each phrase and line. I will suggest below that in the night of the lament we find that the note has become one of longing, held in failing anticipation.

Before we come to the third major shape of the song, I need to note one variation, if not a perversion, namely the sinister song. In brief, this song is a means by which the hymn and the discordant song meet one another. More of a one-night-stand or perhaps an occasional affair, this is a minor but in-

¹³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Jacques Attali, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977).

¹⁴ The hymn is not always so comforting. For instance, in "Sad Waters" (Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Your Funeral ... My Trial*, 1986, Mute Records), the smooth tones of an electric organ emerge in the last couple of bars, reminding one of nothing less than the organ of a crematorium chapel, with its touchingly anti-septic decor.

triguing song: a hymn with an ominous twist, in which discordant elements are more comfortable. Found mostly on *Murder Ballads*,¹⁵ it signals that the hymn may actually offer us a false redemption, that sin always crouches at the door.

If the sinister song provides welcome relief from what quickly becomes the tiresome hymn (*The Boatman's Call*,¹⁶ dominated by hymns, is perhaps the least listenable of all Cave's recordings), then the dialectical garage song is the full, adrenalin-pumping resolution. Now we have the splendour of the anarchic and discordant song, but in a way that overcomes the discordant nature by allowing each element to flourish fully. The tempo is usually up-beat, in full rock—much like a bunch of old rockers returning to the garage of their youth and letting rip with glee. While the hymn may seem easy to find, the dialectical song is as difficult to achieve as the anarchic song: full of hard work, running the danger of slipping away again, its moments are more fleeting than one would hope. Not only does that heighten their sheer pleasure, but it is also a mark of Cave's own search for redemption.

Anarchy ...

Contrary to what one might expect, the anarchic song is not some primeval chaos—the *tohu vavohu* of Genesis 1:2—which must then be shaped and formed in the creative musical act. That is to say, this form of the song is not a natural state from which one emerges and into which one easily falls once again. The early bands in which Cave was involved work very hard indeed to achieve the anarchic song, which comes into its own in perhaps a handful of pieces: “Pleasure Avalanche” from *Mutiny!!/The Bad Seed*,¹⁷ “The Fried Catcher” in *The Birthday Party*¹⁸ “The Dim Locator” and “Big Jesus Trash Can” in *Junkyard*,¹⁹ and then a fistful—“Music Girl,” “Cry,” “Ho Ho,” “Figure of Fun,” “A Dead Song,” “Yard,” “Just You and Me,” “Blundertown” and “Kathy's Kisses”—from *Prayers on Fire*.²⁰ A relatively meagre collection, is it not? And they are all gathered from a relatively short period of time, from 1980 to 1983, the era of The Birthday Party band.

¹⁵ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Murder Ballads*, 1996, Mute Records.

¹⁶ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Boatman's Call*, 1997, Mute Records.

¹⁷ The Birthday Party, *Mutiny!!/The Bad Seed*, 1983, Mute Records.

¹⁸ The Birthday Party, *The Birthday Party*, 1980, Missing Link.

¹⁹ The Birthday Party, *Junkyard*, 1982, Virgin.

²⁰ The Birthday Party, *Prayers on Fire*, 1981, Virgin.

Fast or slow, these examples of the anarchic song clash, whine, crunch, growl, screech and grate. Celebrating the disdain of any key register, the harsh, metallic drums smash their way through, the bass is as scatty as can be, and Cave's voice (to which I will return below) shows an extraordinary versatility, preferring cacophony over melody any day. In a word: brilliant. It is as close one might get to a glorious anarchism of the note, down to its roots in time and rhythm.

In order to see how the full anarchic song is actually quite difficult to achieve, let us consider three early collections, one the first album released by The Boys Next Door, called *Door, Door*,²¹ the second in what is perhaps the earliest recording, made of the band performing live at the Soundboard, Melbourne²² and the third the eponymous first album of The Birthday Party. *Door, Door* involves reasonably straightforward rock, obeying most of the "rules," with recognisable and well-slotted places for the note, a few additions (saxophone and an eerie synthesiser), but above all a driving beat that would work well in any pub. None of the numbers stand out, except perhaps "After a Fashion" and "I Mistake Myself" for their smoothness. In short, this album is a long way from the anarchic song that would turn up a couple of years later, for only with *Prayers on Fire* (1981) does the real punk begin.

And if we were hoping to see the anarchic song emerge in the vigour of drug-fuelled youth with *The Birthday Party*, the album that announced the new band, then we are in for some disappointing listening. To be sure, it is rougher and more ragged, but the bass line is strong, anchoring the songs—"Hats on Wrong," "Hair Shirt," "Guilt Parade," "Riddle House" (with a slightly more complex poly-rhythm), "Waving My Arms," "The Red Clock" and "Happy Birthday" (in short, nearly the whole album)—even to the point of providing a marching beat ("Mr. Clarinet"), so that one gains the impression of a reasonably disciplined note. Occasionally guitars (under Rowland Howard's bowed back and expert fingers) and voice race frantically about, but they are always held in check by the bass line, pulled back so far that harmony threatens to break out, especially in "Guilt Parade" and "Waving My Arms."

Is there any hint of the anarchic song on these early albums? One solitary piece on each album offers a taste: in the midst of the rather predictable driving rhythm of "Somebody's Watching" (on *Door, Door*) we hear some

²¹ Boys Next Door, *Door, Door*, 1979, Grey Area Records.

²² Nick Cave, *Melbourne Soundboard*, 1977, Personal.

dirt in the guitar, some growling feedback that messes with the relatively clean sound of the album as a whole. But with “The Fried Catcher” from *The Birthday Party* do we finally come upon the first full anarchic song: a heavily vagrant guitar opens up, Cave’s voice jumps nervously about, the bass line does come in a little, but it is certainly not there to anchor the rest; indeed, the percussion, with its clonks and bangs, ends up being as much a part of mayhem as the rest. And the glorious, feedback-dragged guitar close is brilliant.

The solitary moment of “The Fried Catcher” would soon enough crash through to the fully anarchic album of a year later, *Prayers on Fire*. But before we get there, I would like to trouble what has been a reasonably chronological path, one that awaits the emergence of the full-blooded anarchic song. For now our somewhat linear narrative is broken up by a turn back to the first recording made by The Boys Next Door, back in 1977 at the Melbourne Soundboard. Made up mostly of cover versions, this live-set sounds on first hearing like an on-stage version of the band that recorded *Door, Door*, except that the edges are rougher, with more of a touch of the anarchic song than either of the two albums I have discussed already. Thus, “Gloria,” “My Generation,” “My Future,” “These Boots Are Made for Walking,” “World Panic,” and “Louie Louie” all manifest, as known songs, recognisable patterns for the note, yet they have been roughed up, shirts torn, smokes scrounged from passers-by on the wrong side of the tracks. At one or two moments the note slips closer still to the anarchic song: “I’m 18,” with its slurred lyrics, twanging guitar and straying drums sounds more like the punk for which Cave et al. were celebrated not long afterwards. But “Masturbation Generation” is the stand-out here, since it is both a Cave original and foreshadows the anarchic song to come—the voice is ragged, the sound “raw” and the note excited by the sense that it is about to be let out of prison.

Fully released it certainly is, bounding out full of angry energy, in the three central exhibits of *The Birthday Party*: *Prayers on Fire*, *Junkyard*, and *Mutiny!!/The Bad Seed*. Given their common ground in exploring the full anarchic possibilities of the note, I take them together. Here we find pieces full of screeching, screaming, grating, shouted lyrics that celebrate the disdain of any key, harsh, clashing drums with cymbals smashing their way through, a bass with ADHD and voices in cacophony. Three of the best examples, one from each album: in “Ho Ho” (*Prayers on Fire*) rhythm itself disappears in the anarchism of the song; in “Pleasure Avalanche” (*Mutiny!!/The Bad Seed*), the note simply breaks down in the full anarchism of growls, feedback, erratic

drums and a bass that is doing something at a good distance from the others; and in “The Dim Locator” and “Big Jesus Trash Can” (*Junkyard*), it becomes difficult to distinguish the various instruments as markers of the errant note, for now the cacophony blends screaming guitar, sepulchral voice, metallic clashing of drums and bass’s thumping into one crescendo of noise.

In short, they are pieces in pure self-destruct mode, engaged in musical civil war, so much so that it becomes an almost forlorn task to find any exceptions. Where exceptions do turn up we find variations on the anarchic song: for example, with “King Ink” (and partly “Dull Day” and “Magic Girl”—all from *Prayers on Fire*) the bass is initially noticeably present, but now as a focus for attack from manic guitar and ruined voice. Or, with the track “She’s Hit” (from *Junkyard*), we stumble across a contest between Cave’s voice and Rowland Howard’s guitar, with the drums working overtime for a look-in.²³

However, once the anarchic song has been gained, one or two glimmers of new possibilities begin to show their faces, if somewhat momentarily. To begin with, in the slower tracks, “Several Sins” and “6 Inch Gold Blade” (and the later section of “Kiss Me Black”), once again from *Junkyard*, a wildly errant note now encounters not a growling and screaming voice from Cave, but one with some timbre and resonance. So also with a couple of tracks from *Mutiny!/The Bad Seed*, namely “Deep in the Woods” and “Jennifer’s Veil”: the threat here is that the resonant quality of Cave’s voice threatens to break out, holding the song together in a way that will become dominant later with *The Bad Seeds*. And with “6 Inch Gold Blade” and “Deep in the Woods” we also find the seeds of what will later become the “sinister song”—a slow piece with a thoroughly macabre twist, madness and death quivering at its very core. Yet the full sinister song must await the hymn in order to come into its own.

Soon we pass to the discordant song, more characteristic of *The Bad Seeds* than *The Birthday Party*’s anarchic song. But what is the difference? Simply put, the full anarchic song disdains the anchoring effect of the bass line, whereas the discordant song prefers to challenge the bass (a precursor appears with a song I mentioned above—“King Ink” from *Prayers on Fire*). Is the emergence of the discordant song then a slight amelioration of the anarchic song and perhaps a step towards redemption? Is it a necessary transition to the dialectical song, which may well be regarded as the anarchic song that has become the *Aufhebung* of itself? Let us see.

²³ Indeed, Howard’s influence is strong on these albums, so much so that a good many would hold him up as an example of the purity of this music, before Cave “sold out” later on.

... and Discordancy

Initially the transition to The Bad Seeds manifests little apparent change. The note is still ominous, discordant and angry, full of the reeling blows of ongoing tension or conflict. On the first three albums—*From Her to Eternity*,²⁴ *The Firstborn is Dead*,²⁵ and *Kicking Against the Pricks*²⁶—the anarchic song seems to be in full flight, playing freely with the codes of harmony, gleefully grasping howlers and running off with the most unlikely of companions. Here too we find conflict within the note, the internal dynamics of the song pulling every way so that it constantly threatens to fall apart. For instance, in *The Firstborn is Dead* the note clangs, twangs (bass guitar) and crashes (the stark drums) its way through an imagined southern USA, full of howling and fearful growling and occasional traces of ringing quality. Songs such as “Tupelo” may bring the note rushing upon us, riding the thunder and heavy black clouds of an ominous storm, while “Say Goodbye to the Little Girl Tree” or “Knockin’ on Joe” or “The Six Strings That Drew Blood” (redone from *Mutiny!!/The Bad Seed*), with their jarring atonality, make for anything but easy listening.

All the same, some variations begin to creep into the music, the first a distinctive feature of *The Firstborn is Dead* and the other a more general tendency. To begin with, in an album whose title alludes to the Exodus myth of the divine slaughter of the firstborn Egyptians at the moment of the Israelites’ flight, we find a stark and solitary note. That loneliness has already been foreshadowed in “A Box for Black Paul” on *From Her to Eternity*, with its laboured piano, wandering voice and occasional bass. But here its full isolation comes to the fore. Technically, the stark and ascetic loneliness of the note is due to the preference for singularity—a cymbal, solitary guitar note (no strummed chords), single, articulated piano notes and the alienated voice of Cave on “Say Goodbye to the Little Girl Tree,” or the harmonica, jarring voices and plinking piano of “Knockin’ on Joe,” or the meandering uncertainty of the plodding bass and errant drum on “Blind Lemon Jefferson.” I would suggest that here we have a prime instance of music’s origins in a listening to oneself, to one’s own body and its sounds (as Bloch argued). The overwhelming sense of stripped-down music, bare notes twanging, clashing and howling, serves to emphasise Cave’s voice. From that emaciated, drug-

²⁴ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *From Her to Eternity*, 1984, Mute Records.

²⁵ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Firstborn is Dead*, 1985, Mute Records.

²⁶ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Kicking Against the Pricks*, 1986, Mute Records.

ridden body emerges a range of sounds that gives one the feeling not only of listening to Cave's own body, but that we have been given the privilege of access to that internally focused activity as well.

This solitary sparseness of this note meshes in with at least two factors: drugs and an underlying liberal ideology of the individual. With a taste for endless cigarettes, hard liquor and harder drugs—so much so it is a wonder Cave both made it to fifty and managed to give them all up—he would, until about 1997, scribble down lyrics when the muse would take him and then bring a fistful of lyrical scraps to rehearsal or the studio. There the band in its various incarnations would build a song, allowing their musical idiosyncrasies to show forth. (Needless to say, any musical score was far from the scene—and thereby The Bad Seeds carried on a tradition that goes back to the willed ignorance of conventional musical technique and composition of early jazz.) Indeed, at this time the band made a name for itself for drug-induced performance antics. Mick Harvey, the long-time multi-instrumentalist (with Cave from high-school days), confessed that he was often afraid someone would get seriously injured in these performances. Needless to say, the crowds came to witness, mouths agape, such overt excess.

But it is also part and parcel of a deep allegiance to creative individuality that ties in most strongly with the ideology of liberalism. Cave's Christology, if not his religious articulations in general and his liking for heresy are also part of this allegiance.²⁷ This private individual professes not to be bound by any codes except his own, voicing (paradoxically) rather conventional desires for authenticity and rawness, disdain for critics and commercialisation (the old saw of "selling out"), listening only to the sensitive and temperamental muse. So too with the solitary note of this time, which provides an extreme musical form of the sacrosanct private individual—not a bad achievement when you are in a band, even if its name begins with your own (*Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds*).

I did promise another variation, which stands in some tension with this solitary note: the increasing dominance of the bass line. Indeed, this factor is the main reason for distinguishing between the anarchic and the discordant songs. The full anarchic song dispenses, as we saw, with the bass and any conventional rhythm; by contrast, in the discordant song the note struggles

²⁷ Roland Boer, "Jesus of the Moon: Nick Cave's Christology," in *The Bible In/And Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*, ed. Elaine Wainwright and Philip Culbertson (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 127–39.

against the controlling role of the bass and drums. For example, in “Cabin Fever” and “From Her to Eternity” (in the album of that name) we find a reasonably recognisable rhythm, but the note itself fights this rhythm, running off on its own only to be brought back again at the end of a very long leash. At another level, the struggle takes place within the note, embodied above all in Blixa Bargeld’s anarchic guitar and Cave’s deliberately tuneless singing. Both fight the rhythm, asserted with the brutal force of a grimly dominant chain gang in “Well of Misery” and “Wings off Flies” (in *From Her to Eternity*). Mostly, the conflict of the note is contained within these parameters, but at times the fight spills out onto the street. Thus, in “From Her to Eternity” and “A Box for Black Paul” other forms of the note appear to add to its impossible struggles: a piano, a whistle perhaps, ensuring they do not agree with either guitar or voice. At only a few moments is the bass line successfully challenged: at the close of “Saint Huck” drums and bass part company (parts of “A Box for Black Paul” also veer into the same territory); the alliance of the bass line broken for a moment, these two now clash with one another, along with all the others. Yet these traces of the anarchic song are few, standing out as exceptions.

In the midst of the discordant song we come across the first hint of a new direction (in contrast to a mere variation), embodied in the cover of a spiritual. In *From Her to Eternity* appears what at first seems to be a pure anomaly, namely “In the Ghetto”: a cover of the Mac Davies song, it is a smooth, almost fully harmonious rendition with Cave’s voice coming through with conventional purity. Here is the first effort at some resolution, a papering over of the conflicts everywhere else apparent; it will turn out to be the first glimpse of the hymn. Soon enough we get a full album of such covers in *Kicking Against the Pricks*. Cave growls and howls less, the note finds company from time to time, and one picks up hints of a conventional lick every now and then, perhaps even a croon—so the opening track, “Muddy Waters,” as well as “Sweet Annaleah,” “Long Black Veil,” “Something’s Gotten Hold of My Heart” and “Jesus Met the Woman at the Well.” Not only does the note occasionally pause from its violent conflict, not only do we find it enjoying company from time to time (most notably with back-up vocals), but here we find the first hints of that softer note that would become the hallmark of the hymn, which coincided with Cave’s mini-breakthrough into mainstream success.

What are we to make of this shift, in which half the songs seem to be putting some distance between them and the early time of the anarchic and

discordant songs? Two suggestions demand some attention. First, the overwhelming effect of *Kicking Against the Pricks* is that the note has been seduced by the music of the southern United States, a place Cave has never visited to any extent. Already *The Firstborn is Dead* had begun to look longingly southward (unless one is in Mexico or beyond), but it was a look from afar, from Berlin of all places. Now we find a fascination with the extraordinary musical creativity that arose in a situation of racism, poverty, rural struggle and powerful, ecstatic and occult religiosity. This was of course the period when Cave was also writing the novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel*,²⁸ set in a fantastic landscape of blended Australian and southern US elements.²⁹ The note seems to have followed Cave's gaze.

Second, the songs chosen and reinterpreted as covers bring to the fore an element concealed in the earlier, raw, solitary and conflicted time of the note: a sense of deep longing. What is longed for is as yet unclear, although the multi-voice tracks like "Jesus Met the Woman at the Well" echo heavily the spirituals and their longing for an end to suffering, exploitation, and slavery, a longing, in short, for paradise. Is all of this, then, the first step to resolution of the conflicted nature of the note? Does the longing expressed give voice to some hope, a possible path to musical redemption?

Transition

The next five albums—*Your Funeral ... My Trial*, *Tender Prey*,³⁰ *The Good Son*,³¹ *Henry's Dream*,³² and *Let Love In*³³—display a profound diversity of the note, trying out all manner of possibilities between the discordant song and the hymn. Still the discordant song has plenty of room to move, as in *Your Funeral ... My Trial*, in which tracks like "The Carny," "Your Funeral, My Trial," "Jacks Shadow," "She Fell Away" and "Scum"—as well as the signature "The Mercy Seat" from *Tender Prey*—hark back to the first album produced by the Bad Seeds in all its jarring juxtaposition of notes (or rather impossible tensions within the note). So also with later tracks like "John Finn's Wife" and "Jack the Ripper" from *Henry's Dream*, or indeed "Jangling

²⁸ Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (London: Black Spring, 1989).

²⁹ Roland Boer, "The Total Depravity of Nick Cave's Literary World," *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 3 (2011): 312–28.

³⁰ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Tender Prey*, 1988, Mute Records.

³¹ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *The Good Son*, 1990, Mute Records.

³² Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Henry's Dream*, 1992, Mute Records.

³³ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Let Love In*, 1994, Mute Records.

Jack” from *Let Love In*, each of them a great piece of discordancy, with the note pulling in all directions, all of which the bass line tries to hold together with only limited success.

The spiritual too hangs over some of the tracks, now expressed as what I have called the note full of deep longing, especially in “Stranger than Kindness” from *Your Funeral ... My Trial*. While the violins provide an urgent edge, Cave’s voice lingers over the words, savouring them as though he is both reluctant to give them away and yet hopes for something beyond past and present. But the spiritual cannot escape the discordant song, suggesting both the frail possibility of redemption of the spiritual and the search for a new form. Thus, in “I Had a Dream, Joe” (from *Henry’s Dream*), both the spiritual—especially in the opening—and the characteristic atonality of the earlier songs appear. So also “When I First Came to Town” from the same album, in which the atonal tendencies of the verses clash with the refrain of “O Sweet Jesus.” All of which is shown up starkly in the two versions of “Do You Love Me” from *Let Love In*: in the first version we are tantalisingly promised a smooth, co-ordinated song, but as soon as the first keyboard kicks in we know we are in for a more atonal piece, which is then exacerbated by the second keyboard, twanging guitar and Cave’s solo voice. But then the second version (the last track on the album) slows the whole song down: the result is that the atonality is softened and Cave’s voice gains its resonance, so that now the track hints at the lament we will meet soon enough. In sum, these blendings of the spiritual and the discordant song suggest that there is always a risk that salvation slips away, that the attempt of overcoming fails. In short: we sin again too quickly.

Hymn (and Lament)

All this experimentation of forms, of mixing and matching, leads to perhaps the most significant new development in the song: the hymn. Its features we have already met: a strong piano or organ, a softened bass line, a significant change of the tempo and rhythm in a much slower song which is accompanied by a choir or congregation. The hymn bursts into Cave’s music with extraordinary purity, appearing as a simple cover, namely, the Spanish “Foi Na Cruz” from *The Good Son*. Here are the multiple voices of the choir, here the slowed down song and here, perhaps most noticeably, the congregation led by Cave’s deeply resonant voice. No longer does he seek to exploit its obvious quality on the atonal shouts, screeches and growls of an early piece

such as “Big Jesus Trash Can,” for now the timbre and richness of his voice follows more conventional paths of harmony. In many respects the hymn is the natural outflow of the spiritual, giving musical expression to longing, loss and faith; but it is also the musical form of the lyrical love song.

Now that the hymn has announced itself in full grandeur, it undergoes a number of experiments, even an occasional mutation, in relation to the other forms of the song we have met thus far. Other relatively pure examples occur, such as the “The Ship Song” from *The Good Son* (also a profoundly seductive love song), again sung slowly, backed up by the choir and the lining up of the note in a rich harmony. So also “Christina the Astonishing” from *Henry’s Dream*, replete with an electric organ in a clear, subdued, even worshipful piece, except that here Cave sounds like a soloist in a choir which comes in quietly to support him at some points.

Still, the pure hymn is relatively rare, scattered among a liberal supply of discordant tracks; occasionally, however, both discordant song and hymn meet in the same piece. Is this a case of struggling emergence, impurities still clinging to the hymn as it is dragged from the water, or is something else happening in the mixed instances? “The Weeping Song” (from *The Good Son*) seems like the former, for although the slowly sung lyrics, multiple vocals and the resonances of Cave’s voice suggest a hymn, the driving bass takes it out of that realm. Two far more interesting examples come with “Straight to You” and “Loom of the Land” (*Henry’s Dream*): much is made of the dragging note of longing as part of what sounds distinctly like a hymn, yet that form is disturbed by a constant backdrop of the discordant note. The effect is to present the hymn as an attempted resolution of the discordant song *within the same piece*. That is to say, within these tracks the larger pattern I have been tracing of the relation between discordant song and hymn appears in microcosm. That this resolution eventually fails shows up later in another combination of the discordant song and the hymn, namely the sinister song, but its moment needs to wait a little longer.³⁴

A further and significant variation on the hymn is the lament, which we will meet more than once in the music to come. Already a small crowd of laments has gathered: “Nobody’s Baby Now,” “Ain’t Gonna Rain Anymore,” “Lay Me Low” and the second version of “Do You Love Me” (all from *Let*

³⁴ A minor variation on this suggestion of failure appears in a very different treatment of the congregational voice of the hymn: both “Loverman” and “Thirsty Dog” (from *Let Love In*) use multiple voices to enhance the discordancy of the note, pointing to the eventual unravelling of the hymn.

Love In). All of the features of the hymn appear here, but with one noticeable difference, for the slow, carefully sung note falls whenever possible—in disappointment, sadness, loss.

Both hymn and lament lurch into dominance in both *The Boatman's Call* and *No More Shall We Part*³⁵—spanning the time when Cave finally gave up heroin. And the effect is deadening. One might feel at times that the early anarchic song is an uncomfortable listening experience, or even that the profoundly atonal moments of the discordant song are not made for relaxation, but at least they intrigue, entice, even seduce at times. Not so the endless hymns and laments of these two albums. To give one a sense of how dominant the hymn/lament is on both these albums, let me list them: from *The Boatman's Call*, “Into My Arms,” “Lime Tree Arbour,” “There is a Kingdom” (sung almost completely by the congregation), “(Are You) The One That I've Been Waiting For?,” “Far From Me,” “Green Eyes,”³⁶ and from *No More Shall We Part* the hymns include “Hallelujah” (now with violins and a choir), “Love Letter” (more violins), “Sweetheart Come” (piano and some violin thrown in) and “Gates to the Garden.” The laments include: “People Just Ain't No Good,” “Brompton Oratory” (with full church organ), “Where Do We Go But Nowhere?,” “Black Hair” (organ once again), “Idiot Prayer,” “West Country Girl”—all from *The Boatman's Call*. From *No More Shall We Part*: “No More Shall We Part,” “We Came Along This Road” and “Darker With the Day.” Only two small variations appear in this collection: in “As I Sat Sadly By Her Side” (from *No More Shall We Part*), we hear the obligatory piano, but one that hints at discordancy with its high plinking, accompanied by a relatively high voice. Yet it is a half-hearted experiment, much like “God is in the House,” which sounds much like a hymn, with the piano, organ and muted bass, but now the voice rises much higher in its hint of fanaticism, irony and mockery.

No doubt the tedium of this long list will have made a reader's eyes skip with relief to the end of the paragraph; but that is precisely the effect of both albums and remorseless hymn. At least in a worship service one has some variation—a passage read from scripture, a sermon, some movement and theatre, bread eaten and wine drunk. Not so here: nary a glorious, discordant song to be found. By now it will be obvious that the hymn and its associated

³⁵Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *No More Shall We Part*, 2001, Mute Records.

³⁶“Green Eyes” is worth an extra comment, since it is definitely a hymn, but with the spoken voice counterpoised to the sung voice (contrapuntal, for the recited lyrics come out of sync with the sung lyrics), all of which is undergirded by echoes of the spiritual.

lament offer not so much a resolution of the anarchic or discordant song as a cul-de-sac.³⁷

Sinister Song

The hymn as a failed resolution: is this merely my own instinct, a response to an oppressive listening experience? No, for within Cave's own corpus appears a thoroughly intriguing song with a distinctly sinister bent. Less the major forms of the song that I have discussed thus far, it nevertheless marks a crucial moment in his music in which the hymn takes a menacing turn that once again recovers the total atonal depravity of the anarchic song. The sinister song is one full of foreboding, in which the unhurried pace of the hymn now features a shortened note, cut off before its completion (unlike the held note of the hymn or lament), all of which is overlaid by the mad, thoroughly self-absorbed voice. Yet the most distinctive feature of the sinister song is the way the hymn and the discordant/anarchic song blend in a way that is definitely not redemptive. Unlike the combinations I noted earlier, in which this combination seemed to enact an effort at redemptive resolution, with the hymn trying to overcome the discordant song, the sinister song shows the breakdown of the hymn, its failed effort at redemption now taking a twist via elements of the discordant song into deeply ominous territory.

A few precursors to the sinister song appear, such as the foreboding piece "The Singer" from *Kicking Against the Pricks*, or, from *Let Love In*, the thoroughly evil "Loverman," or the murderous "Red Right Hand" with its cut-off note, or "I Let Love In," in which atonality undermines the attempted resolution of the hymn. Yet the most sustained instance of the sinister song appears in *Murder Ballads*. The immediate impression—with the opening track "Song of Joy," reinforced with "Lovely Creature" as well as "Stagger Lee" and "O'Malley's Bar"—is that the atonal note is alive and well (one of the few items that does thrive in an album strewn with murdered bodies), struggling against the slow pace of the hymn, its resonant voice and even choir. Even the apparent hymn, the cover of Bob Dylan's "Death is Not the End," has an ironically macabre feel at the end of the album. And now a twisted lament appears: "Henry Lee" (a cover), "Where the Wild Roses Grow" and "The Kindness of Strangers" are all full of keyboard, a slowed note that perpetually drops and in some cases a forlorn woman's voice (to

³⁷ The paradox is of course that it was precisely these that enabled Cave's breakthrough into a much wider popularity, although that was with a select few of these hymns.

the point of sobs in “The Kindness of Strangers”) that stands out from the choir.

However, the definitive sound of the sinister song is rendered by the mad voice, marked above all by the elaborate articulation, the lascivious attention to the word’s own detail, the soft sound of opening lips, a quiver of excitement, as well as moments of intense crescendo and even gravelly breathing (in “Lovely Creature”). This crazy voice runs through “Song of Joy,” “Curse of Millhaven,” “Crow Jane” and “O’Malley’s Bar.” That last, brilliant track also reveals another dimension: the orgasmic edge of the murderer’s voice as he narrates his killings.

But Cave is never content to remain with a new form of the song, for just when I have identified the sinister note, he gives it a twist: the upbeat, dance-like rhythm, all delivered in a bright key. This incongruously snappy feel appears with “Stagger Lee,” “Lovely Creature,” “Curse of Millhaven,” to a lesser extent with “Crow Jane,” but especially in the bravura “O’Malley’s Bar.” I am reminded of Bloch’s comment on Beethoven, namely that he would overturn the conventions of minor and major keys, seeing the rules as opportunities for creativity rather than boundaries within one must remain.³⁸ Nonetheless, the upbeat note adds another layer to the sinister song, for along with the mad voice, that note adds to the menacing tone.

The failed resolution of the hymn embodied in the sinister note would not mean the end of the hymn or the lament, for *Murder Ballads* (1996) actually appeared before *The Boatman’s Call* (1997) and *No More Shall We Part* (2001). And we come across the hymn in the later albums as well, as we shall soon see. So, why locate the sinister song in my argument after these works? It has a logical place here, one that belies the pressure of a linear narrative. Or rather, I would suggest that the sinister song already reveals the failure of the hymn’s resolution before that latter form comes into full flower.

Dialectical Song

In contrast to the hymn, resolution or indeed redemption is attained in what I have called the dialectical song. Lest this argument should seem like a grand dialectical flourish in which all is resolved in the end, let me underline the point that the dialectical song is as difficult, if not more difficult, to achieve than the full anarchic song. Many are the attempts, but fewer are the moments when it actually comes off, for it has a tendency to slide away into all

³⁸ Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 95; Bloch, *Philosophie der Musik*, 114.

manner of other forms. But why call them “dialectical songs”? In these songs the dissonance, atonality—indeed, the anarchic noise—of the various dimensions of the note are not overcome by the appropriation of a form in which all these elements are lined up, ordered to follow the rules of harmony and thereby produce a palatable song. No, only when they are allowed to run to the full, to stretch their muscles and pump their lungs with fresh air, to go off as they will—only then do they seem to work together at another level. That is, this resolution is achieved not despite or by denying the anarchy and dissonance of the note, but by taking that very atonality to its very end.

While the dialectical song comes into its own only with *Abattoir Blues*,³⁹ to be followed by *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!*⁴⁰ and *Grinderman*, initial efforts turn up—as we would expect by now—in earlier work. Let me begin with two extraordinary pieces that express the shift between hymn and dialectic song within the track itself—and thereby intensify the shift between the two types of song. They both come from *No More Shall We Part*, an album that, as I noted above, continues the overwhelming drudgery of the hymn from *The Boatman’s Call*. To begin with, “Oh My Lord” threatens to be yet another hymn, thereby slipping into more of the same. Yet once the track gets under way, it draws nigh to the dialectical song, with the note pulling out of the line and then threatening to shift to another level; and as it closes we get the closest yet to the dialectical song in full flight, with every element of the note thumping it out as it sees fit. Even more telling is “The Sorrowful Wife” from the same album: it begins with strong piano and violins, subdued bass and the slow and deep voice of the hymn; but then, smack bang in the middle, the hymn stops and a solitary, repeated note on the piano opens out into a song that is everything but the hymn—a thumping, crashing, almost ecstatic dialectical crescendo.

Other early moments are not quite so momentous, but they are worth noting here to show the longish leads for what eventually emerges as a new form of the song. Already in 1986, in “Jack’s Shadow” and “Hard on for Love” (*Your Funeral . . . My Trial*), the flailing drums, enthusiastic guitar work and Cave’s own screaming into the mike herald one of the first moments of the dialectical song, one that marks both an early recovery and transcendence of the discordant song. So too a few years later with “Papa Won’t Leave You, Henry” from the album concerning none other than Henry’s own nocturnal

³⁹ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Abattoir Blues/The Lyre of Orpheus*, 2004, Mute Records.

⁴⁰ Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* 2008, Mute Records.

imaginings, for here the song manifests, through the discordant groundwork of the verses to the thumping chorus, the very process of moving from the discordant song to its transcendence in the dialectical song. And it does so by cranking up the very same elements of the discordant song until they break through to come together once again at another level. A third example comes from *No More Shall We Part*, the album on the cusp of the transition from hymn to dialectics. In “Fifteen Feet of Pure White Snow” emerges what I take to be the first full manifestation of the dialectical song, with the guitar twanging out, the piano plunking away on its own, the drums frantic, the voice cranking up the pitch and pace, and the bass adding to the chaos rather than trying to control it (as with the discordant song).

These are but precursors, early efforts that perhaps arose by accident. Not so the superb *Abattoir Blues*, the first half of a double album with *The Lyre of Orpheus*. Given the importance of this album, allow me to offer a slightly fuller analysis, for here the dialectical song stands up in rampaging glory. The opening track, “Get Ready For Love,” has crazy guitar work (rhythm and lead), crashing drumming, a voice that really recovers the full acrobatics of The Birthday Party, replete with some screeching female voices—the choir with a whole new angle! Each note goes its own direction in absolute glee—and it all comes together in a way that we perhaps have been expecting for some time. Unconstrained, the note is free to roam, and in doing so it storms over the line to the dialectical song.

Once released, the note may come back and reconstitute earlier forms: “Cannibal’s Hymn” manifests the note of longing, formally resident with the lament, but with a whole new twist: the note may play freely, running now to guitar, now to an almost twanging keyboard/synthesiser, now to a bass crescendo, now to a voice in full flight, all of which comes to a dialectical climax. “Hiding All Away” begins with the industrial crashing sounds reminiscent of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, the band that excited Cave so much in the days of The Birthday Party and from which Blixa Bargeld came to join the early Bad Seeds, but from there the bass does its own thing, the guitar grinds, the drums stay with the industrial feel, and again the female voices seem to sing separately rather than as one, a counterpoint to Cave’s voice. It all wants is to run in its own directions, although it hesitates for a moment, unsure whether it wishes to hold the show together as is or rise above the clashing sounds and seek another resolution, a resolution offered towards the close in a grand dialectical crescendo.

The next three tracks are among the best of the dialectical songs: “There She Goes, My Beautiful World,” “Nature Boy,” and “Abattoir Blues,” with

their wrecked keyboards, trashed guitar, punished drums, voices (female again) in dissonant fullness; in short, the note is thoroughly enjoying the vast new horizons that have opened up for it. Even the choir is transformed, turning the hymn on its head. The backup vocals to these tracks sound distinctly like gospel singers in a church choir, yet they no longer hold back, ceasing to be “backup” at all, for now each becomes an individual voice ringing in an almost ecstatic rapture. Among this group “Abattoir Blues” marks a new direction enabled by the dialectical song: blues. Yet the significant of this track is that it shows the dialectical song need not be a fast number, for here the note slows down and yet it is not a lament, hymn or sinister song. Similar is perhaps a fifth member of our group, “Let the Bells Ring”: at a slower tempo, the note can relax and do as it please, embodying what may be called a slow dialectics.

Perhaps the best way to summarise the dialectical in *Abattoir Blues* is by means of Ernst Bloch’s comment on Beethoven, an observation that brings the latter into the same zone as Cave and the dialectical song. Like Beethoven, in Cave we meet “the universal spirit of music who wrecked keyboards [*der die Klaviere zerstrümmert*], swept in like a hurricane and turned even the strongest orchestra to jelly in the face of his music’s *a priori* exorbitancy”.⁴¹

Nonetheless, the dialectical song is not as easy as it seems. Apart from the sister-album, *The Lyre of Orpheus*, which I will discuss in a moment, the other products—again a curious pair—reveal the difficulties of that song. Both *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* and *Grinderman* show plenty of signs of slippage. Now, this is more significant than at first seems to be the case, for *Grinderman* was supposed to be a return to basics, a rock album in which Cave donned a guitar and these ageing rockers returned to the simple pleasures of a youthful garage band. It was intended, according to Warren Ellis (a member of the original high-school band), “to be a really open liberating thing,” with the band agreeing to “push on, relentless.” To be sure, this album has a sprinkling of full-blooded dialectical songs: I think of “Get It On”; “Love Bomb”; “No Pussy Blues”; “Depth Charge Ethel;” and “Honey Bee (Let’s Fly to Mars)” —the last two flaying the note as much as they can.

⁴¹ Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 30; Bloch, *Philosophie der Musik*, 40. Or, as far as the note itself is concerned: “The extravagantly treated note, the surging sound and the constant admixture composed of tension, chaos and destiny overflow into a style of music which is largely non-melodic, which is melismatic in terms of recitative, thematic in terms of motifs and develops purely symphonically as a whole.” (Bloch, *Philosophy of Music*, 26; Bloch, *Philosophie der Musik*, 35.)

All the same, too many tracks do not quite make the grade, “(I Don’t Need You To) Set Me Free” is a little too slick, missing out by bowing to conventional harmonies despite the growling guitars, manic drumming, urgent bass and voices like a pack of dogs howling on their own. And the slower songs begin to sound remarkably like harmonious hymns with frayed edges, such as “Grinderman” and “When My Love Comes Down” and “Go Tell the Women,” or even a lament, like “Man in the Moon,” full of organs and falling notes.

The same may be said of *Dig!!! Lazarus, Dig!!!* Some of the offerings are as good as the dialectical song can get, characterised—in tracks like “Today’s Lesson,” “Moonland” and “Lie Down Here (And Be My Girl)”—by bass and drums that are off and away, the guitar continuing its manic babbling, the keyboard its stuttering, and signs that Cave’s voice is even better after he gave up smoking (the last of his addictions, apart from creative work and tea). The best, however, is “We Call Upon the Author,” a piece that reminds me of that brilliant description of utopia, in which everyone can enjoy their various pathologies without repression—so also with the various elements of the note in this song.

But that is about it; the remaining numbers do not quite live up to the rigours of the dialectical song. A noticeable feature of most of the pieces is the return of a strong, unifying and anchoring bass line—a feature of the discordant song, which at times reasserts its presence, reclaiming the dialectical song and scoffing at its lofty claims. Here I would locate the opening track, “Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!,” as well as “Albert Goes West,” “Midnight Man,” and even the thoroughly enjoyable “More New From Nowhere.” Alongside these efforts of the discordant song to reassert itself, the temptations of the hymn sometimes prove to be too much. Thus “Night of the Lotus Eaters” and “Hold on to Yourself” have freely running elements, but they are also held together more harmoniously than the others. Above all, “Jesus of the Moon” is the most hymn-like of the lot, with many of the characteristic features with a slower tempo, piano and even violins. In sum, many of the tracks on *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* are quite tame in terms of the note’s antics, for they tend to cohere rather well, an occasional lick or errant moment soon brought back into line.

I mentioned earlier that the four collections under discussion come in two pairs, a feature that may initially suggest the dialectical song has manifested itself even in the production of albums themselves: as *Abattoir Blues* is to *The Lyre of Orpheus*, so *Grinderman* is to *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* If only it

were so easy. The catch is that the latter two are middling efforts, mirroring one another in their scattered achievements of the dialectical song and the good number of those pieces that do not make the grade. In other words, the dialectical hope that one might have had—that the *Doppelgänger* effort of Grinderman would give the crucial leverage for the fully-fledged dialectical song in *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!*—is somewhat disappointed. Does the other pair succeed, the double-album that is not a double-album, since it is two differently named albums in one cover? Again, the answer must be not quite.

Or rather, they succeed in an entirely unexpected way: the degree to which *Abattoir Blues* is the most complete achievement of the dialectical song is the same degree in which *The Lyre of Orpheus* fails. How is this a success? The failure of one seems to provide the opportunity for the other; or, conversely, the apparent success of *Abattoir Blues* ensures that *The Lyre of Orpheus* will slide away. Only a few tracks come close to the dialectical song, such as the slower “The Lyre of Orpheus,” as well as “Spell,” the resplendently urgent “Supernaturally” and (less so) “Carry Me.” The remainder make a few gestures to the discordant note—“Breathless,” “Babe You Turn Me On,” “O Children,” “Spell,” “Carry Me” and “Easy Money”—but they are tempted too often by the false security of conventional harmony and the hymn/lament, so much so that “Easy Money” could well have come from *The Boatman’s Call*, even to the point of the choir and strong piano in what is really a lament. Not quite a return to the hymn, but we are back with the struggle between hymn and dialectical song that characterised *No More Shall We Part*.

Voice

Inspired by Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of music, even using him as a model, we come to the close of a detailed tracing of the modulations of the song in Cave’s musical work. I have argued that three main forms of the song manifest themselves in that work: the hard-to-achieve anarchic and then discordant song, the effort as resolution through the hymn (and lament), its run into a dead-end, shown up by the sinister song, and then the dialectical song. Equally difficult of achievement is the anarchic song, yet it lifts the anarchic/discordant song to whole new level. However, in order to provide another angle on this assessment, let me focus on the voice, that human harp which lies at the beginning of music, in which singing-to-oneself and dance become the bodily basis of all music.

The voice is, at least for Cave, the most versatile, adaptable and powerful of all the instruments. One might formulate its changing roles in two ways. A first, more traditional one would be to argue that Cave works overtime in his early days with The Boys Next Door and The Birthday Party to *conceal* the inherent quality of his voice, even though its resonance and timbre do sneak out from time to time. Perhaps the best example of concealment appears with “Capers” (from *Prayers on Fire*), where he makes use of voice-distortion devices, giving his voice a very low, sepulchral echo. Nevertheless, resonance is never far away, as in the first official release of The Boys Next Door, called *Door, Door* (1979), in which the voice is at a higher register, sung out and pushed a little; yet he cannot conceal hints of its quality, especially in “Shivers” with its long-held notes and tendency to drop. The same may be said for “Several Sins” and “6 Inch Gold Blade” (from *Junkyard*) and “Deep in the Woods” and “Jennifer’s Veil” (from *Mutiny!/The Bad Seed*) in which one hears this rich voice break through.

Very similar points may then be made of the days of the discordant song in the early Bad Seeds: concealment is the order of the day, through howls, screeches, narrated lyrics, and so on. But he cannot keep hiding this remarkable voice, so eventually it simply comes out of hiding and celebrates its sheer class in the hymn. Thus in the first appearance of the hymn in *The Good Son*, with the simple track “Foi Na Cruz,” Cave’s voice goes deeper, rolls along more slowly and puts itself on show. The narrative of the voice is then one of a passage from concealment to celebration, a celebration that would continue (with a perverse twist) in the sinister song of *Murder Ballads*. Here the voice is enhanced in its madness, with the creepy detail of lips parting, humming, sniffing, articulation, obsessive attention to its own detail and ecstatic crescendos.

Then, in contrast to the voice’s strained concealment in the anarchic and discordant song, to its slow riches in hymn, lament and sinister song, where it is actually constrained by the expectations of harmony and timbre, in the dialectical song the voice is—along with every other dimension of the note—finally able to run free. It may roll and shout and strain, as in the anarchic song, it may offer moments of sheer quality, but above all it runs all over the scales, breaking into territory in which no scales may be found. In sum: a pattern of concealment, harmonious richness and then release.

I did say that this is one way in which we can understand the variations in Cave’s voice through the various moments of the song. The problem is that such a narrative limits quality to the second and perhaps third phases outlined

above (the hymn and the dialectical song), for in the first (anarchic) and at times in the last (dialectical) it is concealed. So I prefer another approach that is not so restrictive. Yes of course, in the hymn and its hangers-on, the quality of that voice is there for all to see. Yet I would also suggest that in the anarchic and discordant song that strength is even greater. All those efforts to show the voice under attack from itself—in howls, rapid drops and rises, growls, grunts, deep breathing, narrating, yodelling, pushing to breaking point, almost like vocal extreme sports—are in many respects more telling signs of that quality. Of course, in making that argument, we have come back to the beginning, restoring and transforming the anarchic song, which is precisely what happens in the dialectical song.

Conclusion: The Dialectics of Theo-Utopian Hearing

In drawing to a close this effort at hearing around the corners of Nick Cave's music, I would like to pick up my earlier observation that a significant feature of Bloch's analysis is listening with a theological and utopian ear, or theo-utopian hearing. Such a hearing has lain behind the detailed analysis of this study, but now, in conclusion, let me bring it to the fore, seeing what that means for Cave's music. Within the music itself, especially in the interactions of the different forms of the song, is what I have called search for redemption (while the music is my concern here, such a search may also be found in the other dimensions of Cave's work, such as his novels, poetry, film scripts and indeed in the content of the song lyrics). In brief, the search for redemption within Cave's music follows a path that moves from anarchic/discordant song, through hymn to the dialectical song. The problem with putting it so simply is that it misses the dialectical nature of their interaction as well as the sheer hard work and very partial success of the dialectical song (as also the anarchic song).

More of that in moment, but now an exploration of this proposal in more detail: despite all the destructive, oppositional pleasure of the anarchic and even discordant songs, they give voice to the total depravity of human existence. I understand the notion of total depravity in a distinctly Calvinist sense: since we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, we are utterly and totally depraved and damned.⁴² We can do nothing good or

⁴² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006 [1559]), 1.4.1–4; 1.5.11–15; 2:1–5; Johannes Calvini, *Institutiones Christianae Religionis*, Opera Selecta (Monachii in Aedibus: Chr. Kaiser, 1957 [1559]), 40–44, 55–60, 228–320.

worthwhile on our own, let alone take any steps towards our own salvation. For that we need God and his grace, which comes to us in our depravity and the recognition thereof. Theology is, of course, never far from the surface in Cave's work, albeit a theological perspective with Cave's own unique, individualist and heretical twist, informed in its language and thought forms by the Bible.⁴³ A realistic and not undesirable theological doctrine, for Cave at least it is not enough; the curse of God can roar only for so long. So we find, after dabbling with the spiritual and its note of longing (for salvation), the stunning turn to the hymn, trailing its heavy ecclesiological associations. The early experiments with the spiritual may be seen as precursors not merely for the hymn but especially for its variation in the lament. Although the spirituals voice a profound longing for an end to suffering, exploitation, and slavery, a longing, in short, for redemption, it is a false resolution, a papering over rather than dealing with the conflict itself. We see such longing in a track like "Stranger than Kindness" (from *Your Funeral ... My Trial*), in which an urgent musical underlay couples with the held notes of the singer's voice, all of which would feed into the lament. One may lament the continuance of depravity and sin in the world, one may express a deep longing in the midst of suffering for salvation through the spiritual, but the worshipful note—bowing to God, woman, Christ, love or redemption itself—of the hymn offers a distinct form of redemption, for its history and context are constituted by an institution and tradition which has made the purveying of salvation its business. In contrast, therefore, to the Reformed tone of my earlier comments, we may see this as a more Orthodox or indeed Roman Catholic solution, for which the community of the faithful, whether congregation in worship or the institution itself, is the key to salvation. Nonetheless, the musical form of the hymn offers not a resolution of the anarchic song's depravity but a complete denial; hence the stark opposition between hymn and anarchic song, one melodious, calm, featuring organ and choir, the other celebrating the note at war with itself.

In other words, the hymn has not dealt with the total depravity of the anarchic song at all; it is a false path, leading to a cul-de-sac. Lining up harmonies, softening the rhythm and highlighting an organ (or piano) and a congregation or choir is simply not enough for redemption. Cave needs another form entirely: the dialectical song, in which the anarchic and discordant song is drawn up, its depravity recognised, even celebrated, and yet

⁴³ Boer, "The Total Depravity of Nick Cave's Literary World."

by allowing the anarchic song the full reign it sought but could not find, the dialectical song achieves the musical redemption Cave seeks. For the hearer, this redemption is conveyed not only through the formal transformation of the anarchic and discordant song, but also through the sheer enjoyment and enthusiasm conveyed. One senses that redemption is closest at these points, largely because the feel of these songs is one of thorough pleasure and joy—but that may also be because I am an old rocker.

Nonetheless, that redemption takes place partially and with significant effort—a feature inherited from the anarchic song itself. That is to say, for Cave's music, redemption is never certain; one is always afraid that it may slip away, or that God may not, in the end, have decided to save us after all. One may suggest that here Cave comes to a deeper Orthodox or Roman Catholic approach to salvation, in which one struggles (*podvig*), taking up one's cross so that God may come and help us bear the cross, or in which good works play a larger role, even if salvation is never assured. And so we must work even harder, diligently watching for what is known in theological circles as backsliding.⁴⁴ The depravity of sin crouches at the door, waiting to spring in a moment of weakness, as indeed does the slick and easy salvation offered by the ecclesiological hymn. The outcome: one must work even harder for one's salvation.

⁴⁴ This is a doctrine held in common among some strange bedfellows—Roman Catholics, revivalist Protestant movements such as the Methodists, and charismatic Protestants today. Needless to say, for true Reformed Christians there is no such fear of backsliding, for salvation cannot be lost.