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## **The Magpies, the Prize and Coleridge's Imagination: the Creation Records Story**

### **introduction: vapour trail**

I would like to begin in the spirit of a song that was almost a hit in 1990. "Vapour Trail," released on the album *Nowhere* by the Oxford four-piece Ride on Creation Records, stands as a minor elegy to the whole scene, even the era, which is the subject of this essay. Or, more precisely, the subject of its subject.

"Vapour Trail" seems nearly as simple in lyrical terms as its four-chord repeating melodic structure, and yet on both levels it represents the culmination of a process of popular musical development whose arc spans at least from the era of punk until its apotheosis and decline in the early-mid-1990s. In the hyper-self-conscious lyrical mode characteristic of the whole 'scene that celebrated itself', the vanishing trail is not only a metaphor for the beloved: it is a metaphor for the music itself. The image of the beloved merges with the experience of music in that promise of happiness (Stendhal's *promesse de bonheur*) that Herbert Marcuse located in the 'dimension' of art (Marcuse 1978).

The overall effect of the song, earnest and yet suffused with the irony characteristic of the period, is a stark mix of involvement and detachment. Just as the image of the beloved disperses too soon ("And the train rushes past/Like a day gone too fast," as per "Here and Now," a bonus track on the CD release of *Nowhere*) the song announces itself, returns to itself, and then fades into reverberating memory and finally crystallizes into the seemingly archaic concluding form of a 'classical' string arrangement. It is as if the music itself had become conscious of what Adorno accused jazz of forgetting: the dignity of fashion, its transience (Adorno 1983).

This sense of transience, of change, may be melancholy, but it also portends a possible future: "a better sense can start again" ("Lannoy Point", from *Weather Diaries*, Ride's 2017 release). It is the *potentiality of the imagination* inhabiting this music with which I would like to begin and end, though in many respects "Vapour Trail" came near the end of a great collective period of creative improvisation which would conclude

with the institutionalization of Britpop under New Labour (Harris 2003). The story of the post-punk independent music scene at the end of the last century is, from more than one angle, a kind of tragedy in the classic sense: a seething mass of betrayal, connivance, and exploitation, with Fate and Necessity as the ultimate twin-protagonists. In other words, a “Black Night Crash” of rivalry, contempt and hypocritical denunciation: “everyone lives down on their knees – it’s alright, it’s alright” (“Black Night Crash,” from Ride’s 1996 album *Tarantula*).

The English biologist William Bateson is reported to have said, ‘If you want to put salt on a bird’s tale, you will be advised not to look at the bird as you approach it.’<sup>1</sup> The pursuit of the fruits of the imagination is always tantalizing but, as with the predicament of Tantalus himself, there are internal obstacles to fulfillment. The beloved is so easily fetishized; the amorphous flux of feelings we call ‘desire’ so easily collapse into compulsion or even obsession. For the sake of the promise of happiness, we believe the lie that it is already in our hands.

There is no denying the critique of ‘the scene that celebrated itself.’ It promised unity-in-diversity, but in terminal phase of the scene is too-well-characterized by extrapolation from a common criticism of the C86 music compilation (which is often pointed up as one of the scene’s founding moments):

There were worrying indications that indie music was becoming a haven for bands and fans who did not like, or want to learn about, black music.... Here was a generation of musicians content to revisit the romantic themes of Edwyn Collins’ songs, yet completely ignore the influences of soul, disco, and black R&B that had been indigenous to Orange Juice’s work (Cavanagh 2001, pp. 225-227).

We will return to the strange matter of the ‘indigeneity’ of black soul and R&B music to a singer from Glasgow, or more precisely to a posture of *simultaneous engagement and detachment* that was lampooned (and ironically touted) as ‘shoegaze’ before congealing into a genre.<sup>2</sup> We will take up Dick Hebdige’s proposal that black music and culture formed a ‘present absence’ in the white subcultures, which in turn reflected that absent presence, whether with respect or hatred.

<sup>1</sup> <https://batesoninstitute.org/announcement/william-bateson/>

<sup>2</sup> The fetishization of “shoegaze” has proceeded in lockstep with renewed attention to the music of the 1980s and 1990s, and in many ways the cult of technique surrounding Kevin Shields is becoming as mechanical as the attachment to the Van Halen/Malmsteen lead guitar style already was in the 1980s. It is possible, for example, to buy an effects pedal for guitar which is brand-named after a My Bloody Valentine Song, so that one can perfectly mimic Shields’ sound.

A sense of simultaneous proximity and distance is also how the present author comes to terms with his own experience as a lifelong 'fan' of the music. The fact that there is nothing to be gained in either lionizing or demonizing Alan McGee or anyone else in his social network has already, in my view, been fulsomely demonstrated in the book that is itself the primary subject of this essay, David Cavanagh's *The Creation Records Story: My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize*. While the book is inevitably touched by the spirit of rivalry and violence that propelled Creation's meteoric ascent and disintegration, Cavanagh brings the depth of a writer's experience to the subject – in other words, the experience of *the subject* in an emphatic sense, the searching self-reflection that requires time and space. The personages and events described are written by Cavanagh simultaneously from within a rivalrous standpoint and from a *standpoint of redemption*, by which I mean the view of an imaginative witness who had foreseen possible futures other than the one that actually rolled down along white lines.

Perhaps it goes without saying that this redemptive standpoint is a touchstone for scholars of T.W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and other scholars of critical theory (see Adorno 1974, p. 215). The premise of this essay is that this simultaneously engaged and disengaged perspective can be described in a different way as the exercise of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge labelled 'Imagination.' 'Imagination,' very briefly, is the capacity to see the whole in what seems to be a mere assemblage of separate parts. It is no less and nothing other than the capacity to *perceive one's participation in the world* – to see that one is not separate from the world one inhabits, but that 'something' out there so resembles 'something' in me, that we could almost say that *they are the same 'something'*. This can be an ecstatic experience, but it is also painful to realize that, in spite of this wholeness, one's own view and experience in the end still have limits, often stark ones.

The wild gambit of 'the scene that celebrated itself,' though it was never formulated explicitly by the musicians as a programme, was to make this unperceived participation evident by heightened reflection on the relation between music and listener. On Ride's *Nowhere*, the effect of this exaggerated self-reflexiveness was emphatically kaleidoscopic:

All these songs that fill my head  
 Dance around you when I'm dead  
 All the love I ever knew  
 Kaleidoscopes around to you ("Kaleidoscope").

Imagination, then, was the doomed subject of 'the scene that celebrated itself', and that imagination is richly remembered in *The Creation Re-*

*cords Story*. Imagination is the true hero, as well as the true victim, of the tale, just as it is in Adorable's "Homeboy" (released by Creation Records on the album *Against Perfection*, 1994):

I want to drown beneath the waves;  
 I want to dig myself a shallow grave;  
 hold you up for all to see,  
 I want to cut you up,  
 I want to watch you bleed,  
 ever so slowly.  
 You're so beautiful.

The richness of Cavanagh's text is in turn a reflection of the richness of the whole polyvalent, poly-ethnic independent UK music scene of the late 1970s and 80s in which he cut his teeth as a music writer. This essay's aim lies as far as possible from either the heroizing or the piss-taking, vilifying, totalizing criticisms that were so characteristic of the unstable ecology of 'the scene that celebrated itself.' What is left is to examine the fragments of the past for potentials hidden by their brokenness, their dis-configuration. I feel that Pete Fij (singer and lyricist of Adorable) summarized the spirit of the investigation with stark simplicity in the Q&A following an astonishingly good online concert with Terry Bickers in January 2021: "my mistakes have made me the man that I am."

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The magpie "is a most illustrious bird," at least in Scottish folk-rock singer Donovan Phillips Leitch's rendition of his largely forgotten tune, "The Magpie." This song appears on side D of his 1967 double-album, *A Gift from a Flower to a Garden*, released on the improbably named Pye Records. In a pattern which is premonitory of Creation, Pye Records was a border-dweller, much like our totemic bird. By 1967 Pye had absorbed the independent record label Polygon (whose feature performer had been the internationally-renowned Petula Clark). W.G. Pye & Co. Ltd. was already a large-scale UK electronics manufacturing concern, and was dipping into the currents of 60s youth subculture as a corporate growth strategy. This strategy worked, perhaps too well: by the late 70s Pye records was cast aside as yesterday's news. Donovan's career trajectory – from independent folk musician, to psychedelic pop star, to "mellow yellow" has-been, and terminating in a dubious combination of spiritualism and mass-market surrealism – turns out to have been precisely what the appearance of the magpie was held to be in folk legends: a premonition.

*My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize* is a magpie's nest for the imagination. Nominally a memoir dedicated to the story of an independent-*cum*-major record label, the book is woven from the torn fragments of an integral social history. It is a document of both the final collapse of the phase of bourgeois liberalism in Anglo-America, and of the birth of a new 'neoliberal' era, in which one-dimensional thinking and practice at times appear to have finally 'trumped' the other possibilities.

The epic historical scope and sensibility of Cavanagh's book comes, not in spite of its obsessive attention to the UK independent record scene of the 1970s and 80s, but because of it. He gestures toward, without ever quite making an explicit statement about, S. T. Coleridge's observation of the curious relation between Literature and Trade, Art and Economy, and how the whole dynamic life of the commonwealth passes between these poles.<sup>3</sup> Out of the musical and commercial misadventures of a few imaginative and dissolute musicians, artists, businessmen and women, Cavanagh weaves a quasi-allegorical vision of twentieth-century capitalism's transformation into its present totalizing planetary form.

The weakness of the book, which is also its greatest strength, is its aggressive-acquisitive-possessive-individualist 'magpie-eyed' character, one that it mimics and thereby shares with the entire music scene that it documents. The depth of its insight is crosscut by the overwhelming requirement of self-promotion, the struggle not to optimize but to *maximize* publicity. In this territorial zero-sum game, some degree of trashing others and asserting oneself is written into the ground-rules. Cavanagh himself, in other words, becomes somewhat of a 'magpie' in this book. What else to make, for example, of his contemptuous review of Jerry 'the Legend' Thackray's "'73 in '83", the first record released by Creation?

'73 in '83 begins with the sound of Alan McGee incompetently playing a drum kit. A nadiresque start, but the song quickly finds its way to deteriorate.... It is not clear whether Thackray thinks this is a good thing or a bad thing. Then, about a minute after it starts, it stops. Nobody ever wants to hear it again (Cavanagh, p.78).

<sup>3</sup> Owen Barfield notes, "If we really want to grasp what [Coleridge] is talking about, we must also be seeing Church as something that bears a similar relation to State, and Literature as something that bears a similar relation to Trade, as *natura naturans* does to *natura naturata*" (Barfield 1972, 169-70). For purposes of the exposition below, *natura naturans* corresponds to Coleridge's Primary Imagination, while *natura naturata* corresponds to 'fancy.' The individual human imagination (Coleridge's 'secondary imagination') is charged with finding relations between the 'fixities and definites' (*natura naturata*) through which we normally perceive and conceive, and the unthinkable *process* (*natura naturans*) that produces them.

If there is humour in the execration, it seems irreducibly combined with bitterness. The aggressive aspect emerges more clearly in some venomous ex-post-facto ‘advice’ Cavanagh offers Piotr Fjalkowski:

For Fjalkowski, the onward and upward movement of Suede was doubly unfortunate. It was he who had tipped off the *Melody Maker* that they were a band worth investigating. He should have kept his mouth shut (Cavanagh, p. 507).

If there is any sympathy in Cavanagh’s words here, it seems irreducibly mixed with contempt. And so one cannot help wonder, without wanting to know the answer, if Cavanagh’s history as magpie-writer might account for his decision to take his own life in November 2018. If there was human love in the studious care with which he timed his walking in front of a train, it seems irreducibly mixed with the wrenching *accusation* suicide implies against the world. Maybe this is why the Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle writes in her novel *Celia’s Song* that “suicide is a fire underneath a peat bog burning airless and slow...” (Maracle 2014, p. 153) It is not only self-destructive, but also a destructive, aggressive action against another or others, bound tightly up in feelings of pathos and ‘pure’ self-recrimination.

Cavanagh *participated* in the musical world he avidly documented, and yet he retained an impressive degree of detachment at the same time – which is perhaps why his book has been trashed as “the accountant’s tale.”<sup>4</sup> Despite its more crassly aggressive moments the value of Cavanagh’s perspective remains as clear as its limits. At a deep level, *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize* is the social history of an inflection point of capitalism, a moment of metastasis of domination and control.

### the picaresque magpie

Travelling as the magpie flies, never looking the bird straight in the eye, but letting our attention be captured by attractive objects of interest along the way, we may see how the pattern of Donovan Leitch’s fate extends to a startling degree across domains of space and time. The ‘thieving bird’<sup>5</sup> takes us on a journey to regions seemingly antipodal to rock music, exemplifying along the way Coleridge’s romantic concept of the imagination, so proximate to William Blake’s image-insight of the part-which-contains-the-whole.

<sup>4</sup> This was reported by Keith Cameron in his review of *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize* for *The Guardian*, Saturday November 25, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> I refer here to Gioacchino Rossini’s 1817 opera, *La Gazza Ladra*.

The lustrous, “most royal” (in Donovan’s estimation) plumage of the magpie – a sharp contrast of black and white which cross-fades to flashes of iridescent blue – fits rather awkwardly with its reputation, at least in the Western world. The status of the magpie as imitator-imposter was established at least 2000 years ago, in the poetry of Ovid. In Book V of the *Metamorphoses* the daughters of Pierus (the ‘Pierides’), flush with the hubris of youth, unadvisedly challenge the Muses to a singing contest. The Muses are daughters of Jupiter and Mnemosyne (Memory), representing legitimate divine authority over all matters of musical aesthetics. The Pierides, on the other hand, are mortals and have no divine station or authority. They seem to have achieved some indigenous reputation among the people, and to be talented enough as mortal singers go. But the end of the story is pre-ordained: the Muses will not stand for any challenge to their pre-eminence, and the unfortunate daughters of Pierus will be punished by being transformed into magpies.

In relating the tale, Ovid draws our attention to the cacophonous, grating aspect of the magpies’ song. But there seems little doubt that he must have also been inspired by the fantastic acts of mimicry of which the species *Pica Pica*, like many other corvids, is capable. The sound of their voices is not merely abrasive and irritating – even worse, it is *derivative*, a pale imitation of ‘the real thing’. The magpie, with its rough-and-ready imitations, mocks something loved, belittling or betraying happiness.

An entire index of imperial class politics is represented in Ovid’s imagery. The story of the daughters of Pierus illustrates the unshakeable power of the Roman hierarchy, one reaching literally (as the imperial myth would have it) to Mount Olympus. The story is above all else a coded account of the *Value* of music. The Muses stand for all that is ‘authentically noble’ in music; the Pierides stand for all that is base and worthless, all that “quickly finds its way to deteriorate” (op. cit. Cavanagh, p. 78). The Pierides’ tunes, as redacted by Ovid, “belittled the deeds” of the Olympians in favour of the older, outmoded Titans (Ovid 2004, p.190). They sing strange syncretic hymns, linking Greek, Roman and Egyptian figures in an irregular series of quasi-totemic images of gods-become-animals. Seemingly dismissive, Ovid permits the Muses a far lengthier telling of their more ‘noble’ story – that of the rape of Proserpina as the etiological myth of spring – which tends to glorify Ceres and the Olympians as well as the Athenian roots of Roman culture. When the Muses’ more elaborate song, augustly echoing the ancient Homeric hymns, ends, the Pierides are instantly transformed into magpies. The transformation, as if often the case in *Metamorphoses* is both judgment and sentence – they become literally what they already were metaphorically.

It might seem, by the sheer number of words accorded to the Muses, and by the abrupt cruelty of the judgment which deprives the Pierides of

any capacity to express themselves, that Ovid, the self-styled Eternal Poet of Rome, agrees with the verdict. But what sets Ovid apart from many of the other Roman poets and orators of his time, and what no doubt helped secure his own condemnation and miserable exile, is something that links him across a vast historical abyss to the Creation Records story. I think it's no accident that "a well-thumbed copy of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*" makes an appearance, albeit brief, in *The Creation Records Story* (in the hands of the Scottish poet-musician Nick Currie, a.k.a. Momus, on p. 261). After all, an Ovidian sense of irony, tending toward a total unmooring of any stable sense of value – a permanent flux-metamorphosis – is precisely what, nearly two-thousand years later, in 1983, an ambitious young Alan McGee would style and publish in his vitriolic, piss-taking fanzine, '*Communication Blur*' (Cavanagh, pp. 71-76).

It is notable that the typically acquisitive-possessive aspect of the magpie, emblemized in Rossini's Opera *La Gazza Ladra*, is muted in Ovid, just as the class-climbing aspiration so characteristic of the bourgeois capitalist period was nearly non-existent in his day. Nevertheless, the possessive aspect is implied, at least, in the sense that the Pierides lack originality, that their music appears to be pilfered from others.

The figure of the magpie seems to have been nearly as significant, in its own way, to northwest European folklore as it was for the Romans. The traditional English magpie rhyme goes,

*One for Sorrow, two for Joy,  
Three for a girl and four for a boy,  
Five for silver, six for gold,  
Seven for a secret never told.*<sup>6</sup>

The first line reflects the traditional superstition that it is unlucky to see a lone magpie (in such a case, as folk wisdom would have it, we should salute the magpie, 'Well hello Mr. Magpie, how is Mrs. Magpie and all the other magpies?' to avoid bad luck). The subsequent lines elaborate the theme of ambivalence – the magpie both threatens violence, and promises riches. This rhyme, then, is a remnant of *imitative magic*, with the magpie as a peculiarly appropriate animal to represent it. Magpies habitually squabble over territorial claims, and appear instinctively to seek a defensive alliance with a long-term mate to protect territory, hoard up found items, and breed. In other words, the magpie imitates in avian form all those habits and behaviours that might chafe the guilty social conscience of the human bourgeois. It is a most portentous bird.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_for\\_Sorrow\\_\(nursery\\_rhyme\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_for_Sorrow_(nursery_rhyme))



The British version of the magpie myth has reappeared recently, in the song "Magpie," by the Scottish Unthank sisters (the song was also featured in Episode 3 of Season 1 of BBC's television show, *The Detectives*). Between this recent instantiation and the 1967 recording of the song by the Spencer Davis Group we can trace an ominous evolution. Recorded under the pseudonym 'The Murgatroyd Band' for use as the theme music for the 1960s and 70s youth-oriented BBC variety show *Magpie*, this joyous, raucous rendition by the Spencer Davis Group is, in terms of form, not an English folk song, but a soul-gospel anthem. In other words, the *music* reflects (and seems to respect) the 'present absence' of African American music, not anything indigenous to England or Wales.

The Unthanks' appropriation of the folk-rhyme, in contrast, has a mournful, foreboding cast. The raucous, pseudo-tragic, ultimately festive harmonies of the Spencer Davis Group have given way to raw, traditional-modal harmony almost entirely shorn of the contrapuntal bounce of jazz and rock. It is almost *Wagnerian*, we might say. The profound 'folk feeling' of the music crystallizes in a riveting and terrifying fashion in the song's climactic accusation: "Devil, devil I defy thee." Setting aside the question of the Unthanks' intentions as artists, we can imagine two radically disparate interpretations of the song's meaning. One is that the titular magpie of our fancy is *singing this line to the humans who are listening*. The bird's defiance of 'the devil' is the same defiance which had traditionally been cited by the forces historically opposed to Christian colonial civilization. In a feminist-ecological vein, then, the song could be heard as invoking the magpie in something like the way Lee Maracle (2014) invokes the Mink: as a *witness* that allows us to see what our culture makes it hard to see.

But another hearing, no doubt less faithful, more pessimistic, and more on the level of an "appeal to the sort of person that very rarely buys a CD" (Cavanagh, p. 649), is possible. In this interpretation, emerging from reception 'in a state of distraction,' in a world plagued though not yet killed by dispossession, addiction, conspiracy, racism and hopelessness, the meaning of the line 'quickly finds its way to deteriorate,' into a vindictive repudiation of vague, shadowy 'powers', a xenophobic scapegoat ritual. Ultimately this boils down to the will to make a human sacrifice in the name of the threatened community. The 'devil' in this view is less the repressive Christian patriarch than the threatening foreigner, and in this light the song takes on the hue of a dark anthem for Brexit and resurgent nationalisms.

No matter how far from the intentions of the Unthanks the latter interpretation may be, given that we are dealing with popular or folk music, the reception of the artwork is inseparable from its meaning, or at least much more tangled up in it than Wagner, or Beethoven. The 'meaning

and value' of the song, then, remains as radically ambiguous as the future of 'the English people,' or 'the Scottish people' as corporate bodies (or for that matter, the 'United Kingdom', which so awkwardly also contains *part* of 'the Irish people'). One hopes that the newly evident spirit of national self-assertion may have transcended the unfortunate tendencies nationalism exemplified so clearly in the 1930s and 40s, and that 'progressive nations' may produce new and unexpected social developments and peace. But to cite Sigmund Freud, writing in 1929, "Who can foresee with what success and with what result?" (Freud 1989, p. 112).

### ***Pica Pica, Gymnorhina Tibicen: biology and culture***

From the land of biology, we learn the surprising fact that the Eurasian magpie has evolved an ensemble of behaviours and territorial habits almost identical to those of what is genetically a radically distinct species, the Australian magpie (*Gymnorhina Tibicen*). It seems reasonable to hypothesize that both species, along with their many respective cousins (the larger corvid family of *Pica Pica*, and the larger South Pacific family of *Artamidae* that includes the Butcherbird the Currawong) occupy an ecological niche that has more or less predetermined their traits. While some species are more solitary, both the Eurasian and Australian magpie exhibit a social structure which is striking for its resemblances – more superficial and poetic than literal, no doubt, but still telling – to the human social structures we call 'capitalist.'

Magpies live in borderlands, between forest and field, which is no doubt the key to their fascination in folk-tradition: they dwell on the edge of civilization, a kind of wild reminder of natural forces. Young magpies are born into a territory surrounding their nest which both parents must continuously and vociferously defend against the encroachment of neighbours. However, upwards of 40% of any given population of magpie population do not guard fixed territories, but inhabit a pseudo-collectively defined region of non-breeding birds. It appears that the ferocious competition among the birds for territorial space is a "proximate factor" in the elevated rates of mortality characteristic of in magpies in late spring (Holyoak 1974, p. 127).

The temptation to project blame or evil intentions onto the magpie must be age-old; the magpie's *biological* niche provides us humans with such an uncanny, and at times bloody, mirror for our *cultural* niche-constructions. But magpie social structure, while more complex than that of many other animals, *is* hardwired in the sense that we must conclude that projecting evil onto them would be superstition. If we say of these violent and musical birds, 'forgive them, they know not what they do,' it is in a

much more literal way than the traditional Christian sense of the saying as could apply to human beings. The magpie, then, has perhaps also served as a recurrent reminder that as humans *we are uniquely responsible for learning what we do not know about ourselves*, for discovering 'secrets never told,' even if blame lies neither in ourselves nor in our stars.

### the 'necessity' of neoliberalism

But what can it mean to think about such learning in the context of the assembled personages and events of David Cavanagh's epic history of punk and indie rock in the UK? What might it mean to speak of a theme of *structural necessity* (which is never named as such, yet pervades Cavanagh's text as a general idea) that *secretly overdetermines* all the individuals' best and worst decisions? And how might we locate the potentials for *modes of resistance* in a 750-page paperback, which after all has the look of muck-raking journalism, with a cover that is itself like a magpie whose white plumage has taken the form of a heap of cocaine?

The sense of necessity, of a force acting almost like fate, is blurry in the opening sections of the book, in the stories of Alan McGee's youth in Glasgow and his first disappointing encounters with the provincial end of the UK music business (he had auditioned, we read on page 17, for Simple Minds, but had not made the cut). There is an almost Odyssean aspect to McGee's character, in the way that accumulating failures and missteps only further reinforced his passionate drive to succeed. It is only in the climactic fourth part of the book, 'The Prize' (the titular magpie's supreme object of desire), that the theme fully materializes in all its baleful, ruinous, stupid grandeur:

'The thing about Oasis,' McGee would say years later, 'is that they share my ambition. Noel definitely does. So does Liam in his heart of hearts, even if he pretends he doesn't give a toss. See, for me, it's always been about being the best, the biggest. No offence to any of the other groups I have worked with over the years, but they didn't have the hunger for success that Oasis have. The Jesus and Mary Chain didn't have it. Primal Scream don't have it. But as Liam says, Oasis are mad for it – the same way that U2 were mad for it. It's taken me a long time to find a group that wants to go all the way.... It was going to happen' (Cavanagh, p. 552)

This theme of necessity – 'it was going to happen' – surfaces in the story in a different way when Cavanagh reports how Andy Bell, raw from the abject commercial failure of Ride, pointed in 1996 to the indistinctness of the roles of Ride's members as a root of the trouble, rather than the source of creativity it seemed to be in 1988. In Oasis, in

contrast, Bell found a strict chain of command and division of labour: “*He* does this. *He* does that. *They* do that. And it works” (Cavanagh, p. 572). In later years, following Ride’s reformation, Bell’s lyrical estimation of his ‘fifteen minutes’ of fame (“Fifteen Minutes” from Ride’s 2019 *This is Not a Safe Place*) seems to underline the fact that Gallagher’s authoritarian posture was, ironically, more a passive reflection of external necessity than anything decisive or heroic. The song ends with the repeated line, “You’re done now.”

Yet again, John Andrews, who had moved to Creation in 1994 from promotional work with Virgin Records, contributes an almost sociological weight to this sense of Necessity: “Oasis were going to happen at that point.... They spanned two generations and that’s why they sold a lot of records” (Cavanagh, p. 632). A sense of inevitability beyond the scale of any recognizable individual musical purpose pervades the final scenes of *The Creation Records Story*.

What both redeems and convicts McGee in Cavanagh’s account, and perhaps even in McGee’s own feverish imagination, is the sense that all actors involved were metaphorically on a train with a single, predetermined destination. Or, to shift the metaphor, that they were playing out a kind of endgame:

[McGee] ...you’re at Wembley. It’s a penalty. The goalkeeper’s been sent off. It’s the eighty-ninth minute. It’s nil-nil. All you’ve got to do is kick the ball straight in and it’s a goal (Cavanagh, 561).

It seems, in Cavanagh’s account at least, that McGee lives perpetually on the verge of realizing the astounding fact that all his drive and ambition have led him to a stand where success has basically been predetermined by factors far beyond his level of influence. His own ‘heroic’ voluntary and conscious role in the process, which seemed so evident in 1988, had been annulled. We can only guess, without wanting to know, whether McGee’s extended mental breakdown in 1994 was in some way related to a shock of recognition: that for all his strenuous efforts, he became – to cite a lyric which McGee would no doubt have dismissed as a rock cliché – ‘another brick in the wall’.

We can only wonder at the fact that his collapse occurred, with a kind of pathetic fallacy, in the wake of the earthquake of January 17, 1994 in Los Angeles, which struck while McGee was confined in a high-rise hotel on the heels of a ruinous drug binge. Cavanagh reports that his companion Tim Abbot “believes that the earthquake had affected McGee in a profoundly serious way” (p. 570). Was McGee possibly struck, in the heat of the moment, by the uncanny similarity between the literal and the metaphorical, the present-to-hand and the abstract, the literal

earthquake and the vast political-economic disruption that would in a few years undermine the record industry *in toto*? At every stage, as in any tragedy, the conflicting drives and aspirations of the players seem to construct a fatal game whose true outlines none of the players can see. Looking signs of resistance to Necessity – whatever ‘freedom’ means anymore – we might do well to remember Stuart Hall’s observation about the ‘barrenness’ of the popular music scene of the 1930s:

It isn’t by chance that very few of us are working in popular culture in the 1930s. I suspect there is something peculiarly awkward, especially for socialists, in the non-appearance of a militant radical mature culture of the working class in the 1930s when – to tell you the truth – most of us would have expected it to appear. From the viewpoint of a purely ‘heroic’ or ‘autonomous’ popular culture, the 1930s is a pretty barren period. This ‘barrenness’ – like the earlier unexpected richness and diversity – cannot be explained from *within* popular culture alone (Hall 1998, p. 445).

There may be periods, in other words, where the spirit of popular music becomes effectively sealed off against resistance to the general ‘necessity’ of capitalist (or fascist) political economy. Indeed, Cavanagh himself appears to anticipate the coming arrival of such a period in the Prologue to *The Creation Records Story*: “My own personal feeling is that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in the music business at least, stories of independence are history....” (p. x).

Is the die cast? Our vantage point in 2021 may often seem painfully similar to that of Henri Troppmann, the picaresque protagonist of George Bataille’s 1935 novel *Blue of Noon*.<sup>7</sup> At the end of Bataille’s lurid tale of mounting transgression (including a climactic sex-scene atop the grave of Karl Marx), Troppmann, waiting for his train to Paris, witnesses the performance of a group of young boy-Nazis:

I was standing in front of children who were lined up on the tiers of the stage in military formation.... In front of them, their leader – a degenerately skinny kid with the sully face of a fish – kept time with a long drum major’s stick. He held this stick obscenely erect, with the knob at his crotch.... [H]e would then jerk the stick level with his mouth; from crotch to mouth, from mouth to crotch, each rise and fall jerking to a grinding salvo from the drums.... The drum rolls were raised to their paroxysm in the expectation of

<sup>7</sup> If the crossing from McGee to Bataille seems ‘a bridge too far,’ I cite a meaningful connection in the fact that one of the only books ever published by Creation’s short-lived publication wing (Creation Books) was James “Havoc” Williamson’s *Raism*, a ‘study’ of Gilles de Rais (Cavanagh p. 403), the mass-murderer whose trial, life and times Bataille chronicles in *The Trial of Gilles de Rais*. I have not had the chance to read Williamson’s book and cannot comment on its critical value.

an ultimate release in bloody salvos of artillery. I looked into the distance... a children's army in battle order. They were motionless, none the less, but in a trance. I saw them, so near to me, entranced by a longing to meet their death, hallucinated by the endless fields where they would one day advance, laughing in the sunlight, leaving the dead and dying behind them.

Against this rising tide of murder, far more incisive than life (because blood is more resplendent in death than in life) it will be impossible to set anything but trivialities.... All things were surely doomed to conflagration.... As I found myself confronting this catastrophe, I was filled with the black irony that accompanies the moments of seizure when no one can help screaming. The music ended. I slowly return to the station. The train was assembled. For a while I walked up and down the platform before entering a compartment. The train lost no time in departing (Bataille 2005, p. 126).

It would seem that Bataille's train here – both literal and a deeply metaphorical as an image of inhuman Necessity – could not be further removed from the fabled 'mystery train' of rock and roll. Indeed, it seems to more closely resemble the fabulous-ruinous thousand-car train of Bong Joon Ho's 2013 film *Snowpiercer*, which is an imaginative symbol of a neoliberal form of capitalism which heedlessly encircles a globe that it may render uninhabitable.

In some undeniable way the chain of circumstances and choices surrounding the story of Creation Records seems to manifest another appearance of this same image of accelerating Necessity. Given the dark hindsight of the resurgent populist nationalisms of our time, the obscenity of Kevin Shields' "male masturbatory gesture" (reported by Cavanagh via Danny Kelly, p. 493), made in the midst of one of My Bloody Valentine's infamous 'Noise Holocaust' performances, loses any feeling of delightful perversity and is dragged painfully close to the stupidity of Liam Gallagher's laddish remarks about the Union Jack: "It's going down the shitter, and we're here to do something about it" (Cavanagh, p. 552).

### **racism, transgression and subcultural capital**

We can clarify the implications and wider scope of the tragic fate of Creation Records – and of independent popular music more broadly – with reference to Dick Hebdige's classic text of sociology, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, published in 1979. In that text, Hebdige had shown how, "We can watch, played out on the loaded surfaces of British working class youth cultures, a phantom history of race relations since the War" (Hebdige 2002, p. 45). He argued that "...the history of post-war British youth culture must be reinterpreted as a succession of differential responses to the black immigrant presence in Britain from the 1950s

onwards" (Hebdige, p. 29). He documented how black and white youth subcultures had maintained a tense, yet at-times fruitful interplay. The 1960s mods and the 1970s punks in particular, while characteristically white-working class in appearance and musical idiom, maintained connections to the black communities "at a deep structural level" (Hebdige, p. 29). Blending European theory with street culture at a time when such mixes were still a rarity, Hebdige wrote that "punk includes reggae as a 'present absence'" (p. 68).

The brilliance of Hebdige's text is in the 'two-tone' pattern of dynamic solidary resistance he maps across race, sex-gender and class-boundaries, in spite of some undeniable obstacles to reconciliation. He articulates the ambivalent truth, wonderfully expressed in Lou Reed's obscene classic, "I Wanna be Black," that for the mods "the Black Man was a constant, serving symbolically as a dark passage down into an imagined underworld... situated beneath the familiar surfaces of life" (Hebdige, p. 53). The fantasy (or as Coleridge might say, the 'fancy') of blackness, fetishized as it was for some, was for others a conduit for a radical experience of the (black) imagination. This radical experience in turn intersected with white working class experiences, and even, in the Glam movement, expressed otherwise in "sexuality and gender typing" (Hebdige, p. 61). In *Subculture*, Hebdige illustrates a tradition of fertile and imaginative 'people's resistance' which would appear to span the gap between the civil rights and youth radicalism of the 1960s and today's intersecting anti-racist, feminist and queer-trans-liberation movements.

Hebdige also shows how white fantasies of blackness degenerated in at least two ways. First of all, there is the more bland trend, appearing alongside the first emergence of jazz and blues music, by which black music and culture is "bowdlerized, drained of surplus eroticism" (Hebdige, p. 46) as it is appropriated into the white mainstream. Second, and more ominously, is the manner in which the white teddy boy and the skinhead subcultures "blatantly plundered" (Hebdige, p. 50) black musical forms while expressing increasingly ferocious forms of hatred.

We could summarize the underlying subject of *Subculture* to be none of particular subcultures he examines, but more profoundly a shared potential for a kind of *mutual respect* among diverse cultures, artists and audiences that would be alien to capital, centralized power, and war. This respect reflects or reflected a profoundly shared, though internally diverse, *re-orientation of value*, a shift from the linear hierarchy of values in traditional capitalism and feudalism, to a more flexible and multimodal sense of value, one open to differences and finding in them a source of resilience, novelty and growth rather than resentment. In this mode, the 'present absence' of the alien other would tend to become the spur of creativity, generosity and mutual aid, rather than competition and spite.

Hebdige traces this respect appearing paradoxically in forms as diverse as the sublime righteousness of Rasta reggae and the nihilist irony of white punk. He particularly emphasizes the power of transgression and valorizes *flux* and *incompletion* of meaning as factors distinguishing the mods and punks from the stasis of the teds and skinheads (Hebdige, p. 126). And yet the Rastas' rock-steady devotion remained a 'present absence' in the heart of the 'white riot' of punk.

The analysis of punk in *Subculture* seems peculiarly prescient with regard to the musical material that epitomized the Creation scene. In many ways, Oasis as a phenomenon was nothing other than the apotheosis of punk, which Hebdige notes, "reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in a 'cut-up' form, combining elements which had once originally belonged to completely different epochs... punk style contained distorted reflections of all the major post-punk subcultures" (p. 26). Cavanagh's Oasis, read through Hebdige's lens, can be seen as 'being' mods in the same way the teds had 'been' Edwardian aristocrats: i.e., not very authentically. Oasis, we might say, were teddy boys (*cum* 'lads') who had exchanged the Edwardian aristocratic frills for signifiers of the mod and glam subcultures, and then amped up with doses of football hooliganism and English nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

The weakness of *Subculture's* premise in light of the present, one it would have been impossible to foresee in 1979 in the early throes of post-punk, is actually intimated in *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize*, by none other than the punk-poet Nick Currie (a.k.a. Momus), in his invocation of the "subcultural capital" possessed by Primal Scream's Bobby Gillespie, which he explained to be "the accumulation of hipness – a rather calculated and canny understanding of hipness" (Cavanagh, p. 282). The virtue of Cavanagh's text, in this respect, is the nearly obsessive attention that he pays to the collapse of a subcultural gift economy into the subcircuits of the capitalist machinery.

Hebdige in 1979 seemed to suggest that there was something in transgression which was inherently resistant to power and capital. But the rise of the computer and social media industries has underlined the fact that transgression, just as much as prohibition, can become a modality of control and exploitation. Subcultural transgression is everywhere and nowhere in social media – it's been hardwired into the circuits of value-extraction. The ironic form of 'subcultural capital', which would reduce punk to an R&D experiment on the part of global capitalism, emerges today directly in the stock markets, in the

<sup>8</sup> Cavanagh also notes (p. 325) how, with the development of acid house in the clubs, a new category of participant, the 'acid ted', emerged, representing a fusion of the teddy boy subculture with that of the rave/acid house scene.



exploding or collapsing values of fringe stocks co-ordinated on reddit forums. Blockchain, a technology that allows one to establish currency without the involvement of any government, could in this sense be said to be the epitome of subcultural capital: with cryptocurrencies, the creation of new forms of capital is literally and directly organized by secretive subcultures.

### indie 'respect' and Coleridge's Imagination

Is the die cast? If subcultures seem to be always-already absorbed into capital, is there no hope of meaningful resistance? The weakness of Cavanagh's book, to repeat, results from its participation in the 'magpie-eyed' spirit of the imploding indie music industry, its genuflection, however melancholy or ironic, before the train of necessity. But *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize* is more and other than a mere scandal-piece. It is also a profound investigation of the role of imagination in music, and how the necessary interplay of music and art (Coleridge: 'Literature') with economics (Coleridge: 'Trade') inflects this role in a holistic sense.

The premise of this essay admittedly involves an ambitious conceptual leap – from a scene of degenerating neo-romantic kitsch (Oasis) to one of canonical Romantic aesthetic theory (Coleridge). To support the attempt I am relying heavily on Owen Barfield's twentieth-century condensation and reiteration of Coleridge's way of thinking, *What Coleridge Thought*. To make an analogy to Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, through Cavanagh's text I take Coleridge's thought on a voyage to the antipodal realm of British popular music of the 1980s and 1990s. Deep in those chilly and murky waters, the scene of the collusion of Britpop and New Labour in their implementation of new forms of capitalist exploitation, we can also see the glimmering of the "elfish light" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1969, p. 17) that might release the albatross from around our collective neck. To say that Cavanagh's expansive account manifests ideas closely analogous to Coleridge's theory of the imagination is not to claim that Cavanagh betrays any intention of being a philosopher, or that he was moonlighting as a Coleridge scholar. Rather, it is to say that the enduring value of *Coleridge's* thinking lies in the fact of its profound explanatory value for these stories and events long after his time.

Cavanagh recounts the birth and growth of the independent music networks of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly Rough Trade records, which for a time become the hub of a globe-spanning market for music made by small-run producers, distinct from the commercial systems of the big corporate major labels. On page 39, Cavanagh imagines a satiri-

cal political cartoon (not actually illustrated in the book) depicting two figures who respectively represent the major labels and the independent organizations like Rough Trade:

[E]ach poke fun at the other's tenets:

[the indie labels-] *'You have hits, but at what cost?'*

[the major labels-] *'You have respect, but where are your hits?'*

The satirical image Cavanagh evokes, of two rival statesmen, in fact somewhat blurs the important difference of position the imaginary cartoon text is actually describing. That Cavanagh's imagined satire brings these two figures into the appearance of a rhetorical duel actually takes us to the end of a process that would see both the indies and the majors blended into a larger system. Regardless of the image of the duel, the question from the majors, 'where are your hits?' is *not directly opposed* to the melancholy query, 'at what cost?' The questions do not reflect the *symmetrical* rivalry the image of the statesmen would appear to represent. It is not, metaphorically, a matter of two territorial magpies facing off over their breeding grounds; neither is it two non-breeding birds involved a more vaguely defined rivalry. Rather, Cavanagh's imaginary cartoon represents the claim of *the territorial against the extra-territorial*. The question 'Where are your hits?', after all, is not really a question, but speaks a language of compulsion and necessity. It is of the same order of question as, 'Where are your identity-papers?' 'At what cost?', in contrast, truly is a question, one calling for imaginative and speculative thought about what might be, as opposed to the compulsory identification of what is.

We need to express this difference more rigorously in order to see the underlying continuity with Coleridge. Let us say that *the difference of logical type* between the two statements-questions can be expressed in the following way: for the major labels, 'hits' are in a *multiplicative* relation to 'respect.' In other words, they presume that if a given artist has a given degree of 'respect' among listeners, and if more listeners are added (if a song becomes 'hit') then that 'respect' will be increased in linear proportion to the increased size of the audience. 'Hits', in this view, are simply 'more respect,' and 'respect' is simply a potential which is waiting to be actualized as 'hit songs.' To the majors, the indies are nothing other than failed major labels.

For the indies, the formula is inverted. In this case, 'hits' do not multiply, but rather *divide* 'respect'. In this case, the problem for the artist is that the point is to find 'respect' among their audiences and co-creators, but that if the scale of their audience grows too large, they will lose the ability to influence how their work will actually appear to the hearers. In the end, they will lose 'respect.' The Odyssean gambit of indie producers, therefore, was

and is to find an optimal course between the Scylla of the sellout and the Charybdis of obscurity and non-viability. For while an artist may somehow live without any 'hits,' they need nevertheless to have some relation to the audience that allows them to get paid for their rough trade.

I propose that the indie side of the equation implies the same insight that Coleridge observed in his concept of the 'Imagination':

The IMAGINATION then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the former in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead (Barfield 1972, p. 74).

We can take the 'respect' discussed Cavanagh's cartoon to mean the social aspect of Coleridge's *secondary imagination*. The circulation of 'respect' among imaginative musicians and audiences is what 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.' 'Respect' (not precisely 'love' or 'togetherness' – but a sense of the 'present absence' of the other within oneself) is the intersubjective dimension, or concomitant, of imagination. The process of circulation of 'respect' for what inspires us would explain how a traditional rhyme of British folktale became a blues-rock song and TV theme in the 1970s, and was then re-appropriated with superb self-reflexive irony by Pete Astor in the song ("Up the Hill and Down the Slope", recorded by The Loft in 1985) whose lyrics are the source of the Cavanagh's title, and which Cavanagh reproduces with superb thematic effect, subtly illustrating and reinforcing the earlier image of the cartoon-statesmen. Here we get to hear a fuller account from the indie perspective:

Over the hill and down the slope  
 To the rattle of the sound I go in hope  
 Oh my magpie eyes are hungry for the prize  
 Give me a gun, I'll shoot it right between the eyes...  
 Stalls with prizes that once meant luxury  
 tempting but not knowing how old they seem  
 and those sad, tearful journeymen running on their dreams  
 showing off in the rain in last years jeans.

"The prize he craves," Cavanagh observes, "could, he knows, be awarded to him if the very song he is singing is successful" (p. 171). By

appropriating Astor's imagery himself, recalling a song that was nearly forgotten by the time *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize* was published, Cavanagh moves to retrieve the aspect of imagination from its commodification in the Creation Records story.

Importantly, this creative retrieval is not itself what Coleridge called the *Primary Imagination*, which, to avoid theological entanglements, we could simply call 'the spirit of music.' 'Respect' does not grant any claim to possess the 'spirit of music.' Because 'respect', a kind of social relation amenable to the secondary imagination, is always 'co-existing with the conscious will," it can and will go astray. Shared practices of sounding and listening will, like songs themselves, begin, attain emphatic moments, and then fade. Once-creative energies and pursuits will lose their relevance and meaning. But in the cycle of a healthy human imagination, the experience of loss, unavoidable because human imagination is secondary to the spirit of music itself, is only an incitement to explore new avenues, to 'fade in' rather than 'fade out.'

So where do 'hits' fit into Coleridge's concept? A 'hit' can be narrowly defined, in market terms, by the sales numbers, but more broadly by a linear concept of taste: a 'hit' song is one that is 'loved' by the maximum number of listeners. From the majors' point of view, 'love' of music is in this way fixed and definite, a countable, poll-able factor. The more people listening, the more money spent, the bigger the 'hit' – and that's it. From the majors' point of view, this 'love' of 'hit songs' is identical to the 'respect' they ascribe, covetously, to the indies. 'Respect' is, Cavanagh is intimating, tendentially viewed by the majors as a *fixed definite quantity*, one they would like to acquire so they can multiply 'it' into 'hits'.

The indies knew better, perceiving the weakness on the majors' side to be that *they tend to think only on the level of the fixed and the definite*. They cannot see 'at what cost' the reduction of everything to fixed definition is achieved. In Coleridge's terms, we could say that the weakness of the majors is their enrapturement by 'Fancy,' the third term in the conceptual system:

FANCY, on the contrary [to secondary imagination], has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of Time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association (Barfield 1972, p. 75).

If the Primary Imagination encompasses the whole 'spirit of music', and the secondary imagination represents the creative circulation of musical 'respect' among particular communities and groups of people,

'fancy' would that partial, fluctuating emotion of attachment to the 'vibe' (see Cavanagh pp. 241, 274, 368, and 458) or the 'thrill' (p. 39) provided by some aspect of the would-be hit song. Fancy 'must receive all its materials ready made' because with fancy there is none of the 'struggle to unify' that characterizes the more difficult work of the imagination. Within the limits of fancy, which could be defined as immediate enrapturement by an isolated image, the *alienation* the enrapturement has induced from the Primary Imagination is not perceived. Just so, it might be said, the development of the guitar solo in hard rock music in the 1980s had congealed from the imaginative improvisation it had represented in the late 1960s and early 1970s into a 'fixed definite,' a calculated effect aimed at producing a specific 'thrill by association.'

The matter is complicated, from the point of view of imagination, by the fact that it cannot expel fancy or fantasy from itself, for it is nothing other than the integration and unification of the shattered fragments, what from the point of view of fancy are the mere waste products of the musical process. Following a 'vibe' or a 'thrill', then, is how one begins to write a song, and also how one begins to love a song, even if what counts in terms of 'respect' is something more than a transient impression. The 'something more' indeed needs to *honour* the transient impressions, as it is really nothing more than a higher order structuring of these 'vapour trails.'

In his analysis of Coleridge's thought, Owen Barfield notes a lasting ambiguity regarding whether fancy differs from the imagination in kind or merely by degree. Barfield attempts to resolve Coleridge's difficulties on the subject by way of a theory of *participation*. Fancy participates in the imagination, is even the very material of imagination, even though imagination cannot be reduced to 'fixed definites'. Just as the secondary imagination is only a part of the Primary Imagination, fancy is only a part of the secondary imagination. And yet, without the parts, there would be no higher-order whole to unify. The unity can only come through the participation on the parts. We must always begin with parts and fragments – with fancy – because the whole is never given at once. To make an analogy to the world of painting through Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, there is a necessary ongoing tension between the level of respect and love of work in its unity, and the enrapturement by isolated 'beautiful passages':

Whoever lacks an appreciation for beautiful passages – in painting too, as with Proust's Bergotte, who, seconds before his death, is captivated by a small section of yellow wall in a Vermeer painting – is as alien to the artwork as one who is incapable of experiencing its unity (Adorno 1997, p. 187).

The problem is not fancy itself, nor even fetishism in the limited sense of obsession or 'weird' fixation. That Kevin Shields' guitar sound or the

image projected by Bilinda Butcher each in their own ways appealed to fancy and fetish is precisely what give My Bloody Valentine's 1991 album *Loveless* its incendiary, scene-altering quality. The problem is that the world of 'fixed definites' within which fancy operates is extended to and identified with the whole creative musical process. In this case, 'respect' ceases to circulate, is walled up and counted, and then finally dessicates. This, as with Cavanagh's text as a whole, is nothing more or less than a particular exemplification of the larger process by which "the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 25).

In the essay "On Popular Music," Adorno explains the disastrous dynamic of commodified music, which in Coleridge's terms would be music subjected to the laws of 'fixed definites':

In this situation the industry faces an insoluble problem. It must arouse attention by means of ever-new products, but this attention spells their doom. If no attention is given to the song, it cannot be sold; if attention is paid to it, there is always the possibility that people will no longer accept it, because they know it too well. This partly accounts for the constantly renewed effort to sweep the market with new products, to hound them to their graves; then, to repeat the infanticidal maneuver again and again (Adorno 2002, p. 459).

This infanticidal aspect, the reduction of the living appeal to a dead quantity, is only another aspect of the fateful Necessity which drives the absurd drama of *The Creation Records Story*. And it may well be that this same necessity will swallow Cavanagh's book and with it any substantial memory of the experiment-in-imagination that the independent subcultural music scenes of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s sustained. But the principle of imagination, however much it is degraded and hedged in by commodification (by the fancy that ought to serve it) does retain the singular advantage of a relatively open vision of the future: 'A better sense can start again.'

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### **The Magpies, the Prize and Coleridge's Imagination: the Creation Records Story**

This article examines David Cavanagh's history of Creation Records, *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize*, as an exemplary microcosm of the evolution of British rock music and popular culture more generally in the neoliberal era, which now features resurgent forms of populist nationalism. The essay marks a magpie's flight, taking an irregular path through a history of the picaresque, alighting on Ovid, English folk-rhyme, and finally settling noisily in the territory of post-punk and indie rock. The overall premise is that, in the unlikely venue of pop music journalism, Cavanagh's achievement was to articulate the link between post-punk/indie-rock and the Imagination in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's sense.

KEYWORDS: Creation Records, Popular Culture, Picaresque, S. T. Coleridge, Imagination