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The Gothic and the Romantic in Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Introduction[1]

The Gothic, as a precursor to and subgenre of Romanticism, is concerned with the supernatural and the *underside*, the uncanny, the sublime, the grotesque, the unconscious, dreams, ghosts, the images of the succubus and the incubus, and finds further expression in the dark romanticism or American romanticism of Edgar Allan Poe. The Gothic embodies the concern with the unconscious, fragmented subjectivity, the supernatural, death, hell, other people, love, sex, God, passion and the transfiguration (alienation, estrangement, V-Effect, defamiliarization) that is the standard-bearer of Romanticism from the English Romanticism of William Wordsworth to the Early German Romanticism of Novalis, to the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of André Breton.

Gothic literature emerged in England in the 18th century as a precursor to Romanticism, properly so-called, with the early works of William Blake, William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, a collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge that features poems by both authors, the contributions by Coleridge, especially "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," broaches the dark side of Romanticism, the concern with the supernatural and the unconscious. The pre-Romantic or proto-Romantic Gothic novels of the eighteenth century include Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), and nineteenth-century novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818/1831), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

The category of the 'Gothic,' like the concept and era 'Postmodern,' was first used in reference to architecture. Whereas postmodern architecture refers to the return to ornamentation that was rejected in the

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International Style of the Bauhaus school and Le Corbusier, Gothic architecture, according to Hegel, mimicked nature in reminding the person inside of the "vaultings of a forest" (*HA* 2:688). "Enter the interior of a medieval cathedral, and you are reminded less of the firmness and mechanical appropriateness of load-carrying pillars and a vault resting on them than of the vaultings of a forest where in lines of trees the branches incline to one another and quickly meet" (688).

I. Theories of Romanticism

William Wordsworth's "Preface" to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* is almost like a manifesto for the collaboration between Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In many ways, at least, it reads like a polemical, programmatic, avant-garde manifesto (*à la* Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism) insofar as Wordsworth remarks on their break from the dry wit and regimented heroic couplets of the English neo-classical poetry of John Dryden and Alexander Pope, including the latter's translation of Homer. Contrary to poetry of this type, Wordsworth sought to bring poetry to the level of the common people, or to elevate the common to the level of poetry. For romanticism is not realism, and even though themes might be chosen from everyday life, speakers can be children rather than classically trained orators, and so on, somehow the everyday is transfigured. Wordsworth describes his and Coleridge's approach in the following way:

> The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was generally chosen. (Wordsworth 156)

Though themes were drawn from "[l]ow and rustic life," they were at the same time transfigured and romanticized, "For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 157). In the Preface of 1802 Wordsworth claims that romantic poetry aims to choose "incidents and situations from common life … and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way" (Wordsworth 156).

> 1802: changes 'to make the incidents … interesting' to: to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men; and at the same time to throw over them a certain colouring of the imagination,

> whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting. (Wordsworth, no. 11, p. 156)

Between 1798 and 1800 Wordsworth and Coleridge published two editions of *Lyrical Ballads*, and between those same years the Early German Romantics in Jena published six issues of their journal the *Athenaeum*, which featured writing by the brothers Friedrich von Schlegel and August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the poet Novalis, and others. In a programmatic statement similar to that of Wordsworth, Novalis writes:

> The world must be made Romantic. In that way one can find the original meaning again. To make Romantic is nothing but a qualitative raising to a higher power. In this operation the lower self will become one with a better self. Just as we ourselves are such a qualitative exponential series. This operation is as yet quite unknown. By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite, I am making it Romantic. (Novalis 60)

Novalis' "By endowing the commonplace with a higher meaning, the ordinary with mysterious respect, the known with the dignity of the unknown, the finite with the appearance of the infinite…" resonates quite clearly with Wordsworth's "whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way." The positive side of this transfiguration is the role of children, pristine nature, the archaic, etc. whereas dark romanticism and gothic literature transfigure the everyday to make it abject, ghoulish, and terror-riven.

In many ways the English and German Romantic movements between 1798 and 1800 functioned as a sort of proto-avant-garde. Both movements emerged out of a revolution in poetic form and thematic content, as well as a shift in aesthetics from imitation to expression, and an avant-garde call to abandon the aesthetic ideals of neoclassicism. At the same time, the romantic movements also launched an aesthetic critique of Enlightenment rationality that prefigured Surrealism. Breton writes, "We are still living under the reign of logic" and "Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy" (Breton 10).

> I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession. (Breton 14)

Under the influence Freud, Breton turns to dreams, and the resolution of dream and reality as a means to transfigure the everyday and to break the "reign of logic." One of the ways in which Breton proposes to break this reign is to invoke the marvelous as an aesthetic category of the first order: "the marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful, in fact only the marvelous is beautiful" (14). André Breton himself remarks on the elective affinity between the Gothic novel *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis, and the pursuit of the marvelous, that he sees as the objective of Surrealism:

> In the realm of literature, only the marvelous is capable of fecundating works which belong to an inferior category such as the novel, and generally speaking, anything that involves storytelling. Lewis' *The Monk* is an admirable proof of this. […] Ghosts play a logical role in the book, since the critical mind does not seize them in order to dispute them. (14-15)

Breton cites *The Monk* as an incidence of the marvelous in literature; however, the marvelous is also an historical category for Breton and is not to be restricted to the Gothic novel of the eighteenth century or to Romanticism. According to Breton, the marvelous is evident in modern life, as well:

> The marvelous is not the same in every period of history: it partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us: they are the romantic *ruins*, the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility or a period of time. (Breton 16)

As if to clear away misunderstandings and define Surrealism once and for all (compare Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* and Wordsworth's "Preface") Breton writes:

> SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express–verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner–the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.
>
> ENCYCLOPEDIA. *Philosophy*. Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life. (26)

The marvelous, which Breton wants to revive as a foil to Enlightenment rationality and the regime of logic, extends from the eighteenth-

century Gothic novel to the modern period, and can be seen to be at work in a dark and sinister way in Southern Gothic fiction and in the music, lyrics, and novels of Nick Cave. I am not claiming that Nick Cave is a surrealist, nor that *And the Ass Saw the Angel* is a surrealist novel, but that the ordinary is presented in a similarly unusual, marvelous way in Cave's work. And if Breton insisted that the marvelous is an historical category, it should by no means be restricted to surrealist works.

II. The Gothic and The Erotic

The connection with the erotic is most evident in the following passage from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, from the *Gothic Reader*:

> I suppose I must have fallen asleep; I hope so, but I fear, for all that followed was startingly real – so real that now sitting here in the broad, full sunlight of the morning, I cannot in the least believe that it was all sleep.
>
> I was not alone. The room was the same, unchanged in any way since I came into it; I could see along the floor, in the brilliant moonlight, my own footsteps marked where I had disturbed the long accumulation of dust. In the moonlight opposite me were three young women, ladies by their dress and manner. I thought at the time that I must be dreaming when I saw them, for, though the moonlight was behind them, they threw no shadow on the floor. They came close to me, and looked at me for some time, and then whispered together. Two were dark, and had high aquiline noses, like the Count, and great dark, piercing eyes, that seemed to be almost red when contrasted with the pale yellow moon. The other was fair, as fair as can be, with great wavy masses of golden hair and eyes like pale sapphires. I seemed somehow to know her face, and to know it in connection with some dreamy fear, but I could not recollect at the moment how or where. All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips. It is not good to note this down, lest some day it should meet Mina's eyes and cause her pain, but it is the truth. They whispered together, and then they all three laughed – such a silvery, musical laugh, but as hard as though the sound never could have come through the softness of human lips. It was like the intolerable, tingling sweetness of water glasses when played on by a cunning hand. The fair girl shook her head coquettishly, and the other two urged her on. One said: – 'Go on! You are the first, and we shall follow; yours' is the right to begin.' The other added: – 'He is young and strong. There are kisses for us all.' I lay quiet, looking out from under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation. The fair girl advanced and bent over me till I could feel the movement of her breath upon me.

> Sweet it was in one sense, honey-sweet, and sent the same tingling through the nerves as her voice, but with a bitter underlying the sweet, a bitter offensiveness, as one smells in blood.
>
> I was afraid to raise my eyelids, but looked out and saw perfectly under the lashes. The girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. Lower and lower went her head as the lips went below the range of my mouth and chin and seemed to fasten on my throat. Then she paused, and I could hear the churning sound of her tongue as it licked her teeth and lips, and I could feel the hot breath on my neck. Then the skin of my throat began to tingle as one's flesh does when the hand that is to tickle it approaches nearer – nearer. I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in languorous ecstasy and waited – waited with beating heart. (Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, pp. 102-3)

This passage is remarkable not only for its tantalizing eroticism, but for its transgression of desire for the undead.

Indeed, the gothic erotic is often – if not merely transgressive – a form of perversion (though the Marquis de Sade would argue that all desires, drives, and instincts are natural as they are part of nature, and that thus, there is no such thing as sexual perversion), including incest, as in the family history of Euchrid Eucrow, and exploitation through the abuse of power, and the perverse violation of (bodily) privacy when, in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" Manley Pointer says to Joy Hopewell: "Show me where your wooden leg joins on" (O'Connor 2141). She reflects that what bothers her most about the suggestion is not the obscenity of it, but rather the violation of the most intimate part of her body: "she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail. No one ever touched it but her" (O'Connor 2141).

III. The Gothic and Madness

Prior to the passage describing Jonathan Harker's erotic encounter with the female vampires, *Dracula*'s protagonist conveys the demise of his sanity after having seen the Count scale the side of the castle head downwards: "Whilst I live on here there is but one thing to hope for, that I may not go mad, if, indeed, I be not mad already … Let me be calm, for out of that way lies madness indeed" (Stoker 101). Beyond the fear that Harker has of the Count, he is terrified that there are

even worse things in the palace. Full dependence of one character on another is characteristic of Gothic fiction. Jonathan Harker relies on the Count in *Dracula* ("that to him alone I can look for safety," p101) in much the same ways as Joy Hopewell depends on Manley Pointer, who has removed her artificial leg and is pushing it further and further out of her reach as their intimate moments descend into deep vulnerable places, into chaos, devolving into a heated argument and ultimately ending with insulting attacks on each other's core beliefs, with Pointer packing the artificial leg into his near-empty Bible satchel. He insultingly says to Joy/Hulga: "I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (O'Connor 2143) and then leaves the hayloft with his valise, Hulga's glasses, and the artificial leg.

The spiraling into madness characteristic of Gothic fiction is echoed in the demise of the protagonists Euchrid Eucrow and Bunny Munro from Cave's two novels, *And the Ass Saw The Angel* and *The Death of Bunny Munro*, who both descend into madness in the conclusion of the two novels.[2] Before spiraling into madness himself, Euchrid's Pa snaps and murders Euchrid's Ma: "The house of cards leaned, hung in the air for a moment, then collapsed, and so did the frail edifice of Pa's mind" (188). What follows is a sickening, macabre description of the murder:

> He slammed his body into hers, hammering her head face first against the wall. Glass splintered as the bottom of the stone bottle, still in her mouth, smashed the glass in the wedding picture, and a strange sick gurgle accompanied it. With a fistful of hair Pa wrenched back her head and pounded her face into the wall again. The bottle sank deeper and even from where ah was ah could hear her jaws cleave apart with a clear 'cra-a-ack', so that the third time the bottle slipped into her throat, splitting her grin's skin from ear to ear. … Pa picked up two bricks from off the top of the old pot-belly stove, and one in each hand he swung them out-a-ways – then brought them in together like a pair of cymbals crashing, clapping his wife about the ears and smashing the bottle inside her. Blood. (Cave, 1989, p. 188).

[2] See Roland Boer's excellent article "The Total Depravity of Nick Cave's Literary World" for a rigorous analysis of Cave's two novels. My concern is somewhat different from Boer's in that he is primarily concerned with the novels and other writings by Cave that are not songs. He considers some lyrics as poems but is overall concerned with examining the world Cave constructs in his literary works and reading it through the Calvinist doctrines of original sin and predestination, that we are so sinful that there is nothing we can do to earn our salvation, which can only ultimately be granted by the grace of God. Boer notes explicitly that he is not concerned with the music of the Bad Seeds in his article, whereas I intend to situate certain periods and works of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds within the mode of gothic rock, a manifestation of dark romanticism, and also to consider the relationship between the music, the musicians, the lyrics, and Cave's literary influences by, and production of, Gothic literature.

The over-the-top violence of this scene, brought on by years of abuse and the collapse of Pa's mind, is consistent with the violence of many of the songs on the albums from the first period of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, culminating in *Murder Ballads*.

IV. Gothic Rock

Proto-gothic rock bands include The Doors and The Velvet Underground, especially their first two albums with John Cale: *Velvet Underground and Nico* and *White Light/White Heat*. Bauhaus's "Bela Lugosi's Dead" and The Birthday Party's "Release the Bats" are both recognized as gothic rock songs, but Peter Murphy of Bauhaus and Mick Harvey of The Birthday Party and The Bad Seeds have both subsequently claimed that the songs were tongue-in-cheek, or a "comic number" and a "complete send-up."[3] Be that as it may, scholars such as Emma McEvoy make the case that the subject matter of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds is indeed Gothic (McEvoy). The Birthday Party and Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds have both often been labelled post-punk, and sometimes Gothic Rock bands, despite Cave's and Mick Harvey's disdain for other bands classified as part of the genre, like Joy Division, Bauhaus, and The Sisters of Mercy. The nine albums Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds released between 1984 and 1996 instantiate a Gothic aesthetic, in the lyrical content of the songs, the music, the live performances and stage design, and the attire worn by Nick Cave on-stage. Two of the former members of the psychobilly/gothabilly band The Cramps have played with The Bad Seeds: former member Kid Congo Powers and one of two current drummers, Jim Sclavunos. Although the musical style of the Bad Seeds differs considerably from other Gothic rock bands, in that they play instruments that are standard for rock'n'roll, like guitar, bass, drums, and piano, and rely less on electronica than some other Gothic rock and dark wave bands, the subject matter of Cave's lyrics and the

[3] Mick Harvey, quoted in Emma McEvoy, "Now, who will be the witness/When you're all too healed to see?" p. 79. McEvoy quotes these lines from Ian Johnston's biography of Nick Cave *Bad Seed*. Johnston quotes Harvey as definitive proof that The Birthday Party were *not* a Goth band and The Bad Seeds even less so. McEvoy makes the contrary case that Nick Cave and his bands The Birthday Party and The Bad Seeds *are* Gothic rock bands. I follow McEvoy in acknowledging the Bad Seeds albums from 1984-1996 are more Gothic and are generally better albums musically than the albums of the next period. However, the limitation of McEvoy's article is that it was published in 2007, so I do not agree with her thesis regarding the "Sad Demise of Nick Cave." *Nocturama* may be an almost universally derided album, but *Push the Sky Away* begins a new era in the sound of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds that can hardly be called a "demise."

musical style of The Bad Seeds place Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds both within and outside of the genre of Gothic rock, as well as the sub-genre of post-punk.

The aesthetics of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds have continued to evolve since their first album *From Her to Eternity* (1984). Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds have released seventeen studio albums, which I will categorize into the following four clusters:

1.
From Her to Eternity (1984)
The Firstborn is Dead (1985)
Kicking Against the Pricks (1986)
Your Funeral … My Trial (1986)
Tender Prey (1988)
The Good Son (1990)
Henry's Dream (1992)
Let Love In (1994)
Murder Ballads (1996)
2.
The Boatman's Call (1997)
No More Shall We Part (2001)
Nocturama (2003)
3.
Abattoir Blues/ The Lyre of Orpheus (2004)
Dig Lazarus, Dig!!! (2008)
4.
Push The Sky Away (2013)
Skeleton Tree (2016)
Ghosteen (2019)

The first of these four clusters of albums constitute the period in the career of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds when the band was at its most Gothic period. Blixa Bargeld, also of *Einstürzende Neubauten*, and Mick Harvey, like Cave, a former member of *The Birthday Party*, both exerted an enormous influence on the sound of the band during this era, which also overlaps with the five-year period of Nick Cave living in the Kreuzberg neighbourhood of former West Berlin, his heroin addiction, the band's appearance in Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* (English title: Wings of Desire), and Cave writing his first novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel* under the influence of Flannery O'Connor's Southern Gothic fiction. For some, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds' appearance in Wim Wenders' *Der Himmel über Berlin* (Wings of Desire) became the introduction to a Berlin Kreuzberg underground scene in the 1980s in a still-divided Berlin. The seedy club in which the band Crime and the City Solution perform, and the more ornate club in which Nick Cave and the

Bad Seeds appear, paints a picture of the Gothic/Post-Punk/Industrial underground scene in West Berlin at the time. The Gothic subculture emerged in the 1980s in the clubs in which punks and Goths found their home, such as SO 36 in Berlin-Kreuzberg, Batcave in London, UK and Slimelight, a Gothic club night, also in London, UK.

The second cluster of albums also feature both Mick Harvey and Blixa Bargeld, but *Nocturama* is the last album to feature Bargeld, who left the band soon after the album's release. In these three albums, beginning with *The Boatman's Call*, Nick Cave comes to the fore as singer-songwriter and the Bad Seeds really retreat into the background. The third cluster of albums, the double album *Abattoir Blues/ The Lyre of Orpheus* and *Dig!!! Lazarus Dig!!!* are the last to feature Mick Harvey, and the final nail in the coffin of the Gothic mode of the band. With the next trilogy of albums, *Push the Sky Away*, *Skeleton Tree*, and *Ghosteen*, collaborator and multi-instrumentalist Warren Ellis takes on a pivotal role in creating the sound, which differs considerably from that of the three previous clusters. Nick Cave released two albums during the Covid-19 pandemic, *Idiot Prayer* (2020), which is both an album and a film of his solo performance at Alexandra Palace during the pandemic, and *Carnage* (2021), which Cave co-wrote with Warren Ellis. *Ghosteen* is a working through of the grief following the death of Nick Cave's son Arthur and *Carnage* is about the social isolation imposed by the pandemic. Though these albums differ significantly in sound from the earlier work of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, the themes of morbidity and mortality remain central. Murder is a constant theme in the lyrics and novels of Nick Cave.

Anwyn Crawford argues that "Cave is both a rampant misogynist and an arch-snob" (Crawford). Although it is true that many women in Cave's songs wind up dead, there are also songs that feature female serial killers, like Loretta, who prefers the name Lottie, in "The Curse of Millhaven" from the album *Murder Ballads*, who kills "Bill Blake's little boy," Handyman Joe, Mrs. Colgate, and others. Professor O'Rye's "prize-winning terrier" named Biko, however, was crucified by "two junior high school psychos" (Cave, 2013, p. 254). On the same album, *Murder Ballads*, the father recounts the murder of his whole family by a serial killer:

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

That so many women are killed in Cave's songs might be evidence of his misogyny, though there is also a long history of songs in which a man kills his female lover, including Neil Young's "Down by the River."

Nick Cave's first reference to the "Red Right Hand" is in the song of that name from the album *Let Love In* (1994) and reoccurs in "Song of Joy" from the album *Murder Ballads* (1996):

> On a gathering storm comes a tall handsome man
> In a dusty black coat with a red right hand
> …….
> He's a ghost, he's a god, he's a man, he's a guru
> They're whispering his name across this disappearing land
> But hidden in his coat is a red right hand
> …….
> A shadow is cast wherever he stands
> Stacks of green paper in his red right hand
> …….
> You're one microscopic cog in his catastrophic plan
> Designed and directed by his red right hand
> (Nick Cave, "Red Right Hand," pp. 223-4).

The phrase first occurs in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The line from *Paradise Lost* to which the speakers in "Song of Joy" and "Red Right Hand" refer reads, in Milton, as follows:

> What if the breath that kindled those grim fires
> Awaked should blow them into sev'nfold rage
> And plunge us in the flames? Or from above
> Should intermitted vengeance arm again
> His red right hand to plague us?
> (John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II.170-4)

In Milton's Biblical-Gothic invocation of the phrase "red right hand," it appears as an instrument of rage and vengeance of an angry God.

In a verse from "Song of Joy" that follows the one quoted above, the speaker in the song also refers to the "red right hand" from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

> They never caught the man
> He's still on the loose
> It seems he has done many many more
> Quotes John Milton on the walls in the victim's blood
> The police are investigating at tremendous cost
> In my house he wrote, '*Red right hand*'

That, I'm told, is from *Paradise Lost*
(Nick Cave, "Song of Joy," 2013, p. 245)
From the album *Murder Ballads* (1996)

In this version of the 'red right hand,' which has its origins in Milton's version of the image of the vengeful, angry God of the Old Testament, the phrase is written "on the walls in the victim's blood." Nick Cave's gothic mode of writing in his first novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel* and in the lyrics of the first cluster of albums I referred to at the beginning of this section, involves an imitation and an exaggeration of earlier literary traditions, from John Milton to Flannery O'Connor.

V. Southern Gothic

Nick Cave's first novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989) is generally acknowledged as having been written in the mode of the Southern Gothic, in the manner of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Cave refers to O'Connor directly in the title song from the album *Carnage*, which Cave wrote with Warren Ellis, and again in a recent issue of the Red Hand Files. That Warren Ellis collaborated with Marianne Faithfull's recent spoken-word album of Romantic poetry called *She Walks in Beauty* after the poem of the same name by Lord Byron further instantiates the Romantic connection. Nick Cave plays piano on a few tracks on the album as well.

Flannery O'Connor published two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960). Her collection of short stories *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) comprises ten stories, including the title story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "Good Country People," and others. Nick Cave cites *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* as one his forty most loved books of his 5,000 plus volume library (*Red Hand Files*, no. 101, June 2020). Not only do the protagonists Mr. (Tom T.) Shiftlet, the vagabond carpenter in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and Manley Pointer, the Bible salesperson from "Good Country People," bring to mind the title of Nick Cave's song "People Ain't No Good," Mr. Shiftlet, who also claims to be a war veteran and is an amputee, could also be the inspiration for Cave's protagonist, the mute boy Euchrid Eucrow from *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. But Cave's character(s) are even more perverse, vile, violent, and irredeemable than any scumbag Bible salesman or one-armed, car-thievin' carpenter from O'Connor's stories.

The imagery of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* is unmistakably Gothic. Describing an illustration from a book Euchrid found on the junkpile behind the shack where he lives with Ma and Pa, Euchrid narrates:

> It showed a little girl, feverish and wasted and terribly sick, lying in her little bed. All around her were bunches of red and yellow and pink flowers, and standing at the end of the bed was a macabre figure – dressed in a long, hooded robe and looking all the more ghastly because of its gaping, faceless hood and empty sleeves, one of which was raised and pointed at the little hollow-eyed sickling. […] Examining the figure huddled in the gateway to the square ah was left aghast at its similarity to the picture of Death. Ah was. A formicating horror spread across mah person and mah mind jabbered doggerel, chilling and terror-riven. (Cave, 1990, p. 114)

About his protagonist, Cave writes "Euchrid put his face into the empty cups of his hands, and rolled on his side to face the wall, plunging deeper and deeper still into the bathos of the spent" (Cave, 1990, 118).

> Pa beat Mule to death in autumn, for copper and gold were the leaves. Ah remember because it was the fallen leaves, slippery with morning dew, that made it possible to drag Mule's carcass over to the old water-tower. His back had been brutally beaten. Ah suspected a broken spine. (Cave 168)

In the process of burying Mule, Euchrid unearths the remains of his brother:

> Squatting aside the grave and loosing the rust-coloured earth from the fanning bones, ah discovered a child's tiny skull. Next, a rotting radius and ulna connected to a brittle little hand – and by the time ah had exhumed mah brother's earthly remains, lifting out all his bones intact and laying them out on a soft floor of fallen, golden foliage, ah was sobbing noiselessly, mah eyes streaming. (Cave, 1990, 168)

Though the scene is deeply disturbing, it shows that Euchrid, despite the abuse he suffered at the hands of his mother, his father, and the people of Ukulore Valley, was not without emotion.

One of the central tropes of Southern Gothic fiction is the grotesque, which Cave elevates to a fever pitch. On seeing a group of sugarcane cutters, the same "scum" who had "razed [his] grotto to the ground" Euchrid fantasizes:

> Ah found myself wishing – praying – that the noon-day sun, already hell-hot, would spin itself still hotter, until the vast acres of uncut cane would begin to smoulder and smoke, and the skin of the workers would bubble and blister, and as the sun beat down and the crops burst into flames, the roasted flesh would peel away from their arms and legs and backs and screaming faces in wet, red strips, layer upon layer, until their black-baked bones pierced the thin tissue of skin, shredding the webbery of veins and

> the last tattered rags of hide to a bucket of gore, then crumbling down, these eaten skeletons, to ash … to a thimble of cinders … to screaming dust … to dead fucken death. Fearing that ah would be the one to burst into flames if ah continued to entertain such incendiary thoughts, ah cast mah eyes elsewhere. (Cave, 1990, 181-2)

Such "incendiary thoughts" are typical of the mute protagonist Euchrid Eucrow, especially following the onset of his madness and alcoholism that emerged as consequences of the death of his mother and father.

> In this moment of clarity ah was struck by the effect of the new addition to the tableau and the sight of the angel and the child, and by the sublime relationship set up between the two, as if the one depended on the other, like good and evil, Heaven and Hell, and indeed, life and death. (Cave, 1990, p. 302)

The Gothic theme in Nick Cave is also rife with religious imagery. He claims that his influences have shifted from the Old Testament to the New Testament, to other World Religions, yet remains agnostic. O'Connor, a professed Catholic who grew up in the Protestant South, creates characters who are atheists, like Joy Hopewell and even her tormentor, the Bible salesperson who absconds with her wooden leg.

In a recent issue of the *Red Hand Files*, an online forum through which fans can pose questions directly to Nick Cave, a number of fans asked him to tell them something about the song "Carnage" from the recent album of the same name. He responds by playing the song back to himself and providing commentary on each lyric. When he gets to the line in which he mentions Flannery O'Connor: "I'm sitting on the balcony / reading Flannery O'Connor with a pencil and a plan" (Nick Cave, "Carnage," *Carnage* 2021), he responds:

> I had just read an article that dealt with Flannery O'Connor's unfortunate attitudes toward race, and her subsequent defenestration, and I am experiencing that particular conflicted sadness, so familiar these days, of watching someone I have loved for so long, and who has given so much to the world, driven to the margins by an unforgiving present, taking part of me with her. More carnage.
>
> Lovely half rhyme of 'balcony' and 'Flannery'!
>
> (Nick Cave, *The Red Hand Files*, no. 155, June 2021)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into O'Connor's racism, but the article Nick Cave was reading is more than likely "How Racist Was Flannery O'Connor" by Paul Elie, published in *The New Yorker*. That article cites abhorrent racist views from O'Connor's correspon-

dence, and scholars of her work now have to reckon with the evidence. Neither O'Connor nor Cave should be canceled for problematic political views, implicit or explicit racism, misogyny, or any other position they have taken in their works or correspondence. Rather, it is the task of criticism to analyze the works of writers and artists, to learn as much as we can about their creative processes, and even of their deeply flawed personal positions, not to consign them to the swampland.

Political problems with Nick Cave include his sexism and misogyny (though Cave wrote the track "From Her to Eternity," from the first album, also featured on *Wings of Desire*, with Anita Lane), and also his ignorance of the plight of Palestinians, very publicly defying the B.D.S. movement and performing in Tel Aviv, claiming that Roger Waters ("and company," including Brian Eno), tried to bully artists into not playing in Israel. This anti-boycott position of Nick Cave is something that he shares with Thom Yorke of Radiohead. However, I do not think that Cave should be "canceled" or "defenestrated" for these political errors. I do not take the position of the uncritical fawning fan, nor that of the loathing and execration of the former fan.

Conclusion

In the last forty-two years of Nick Cave's literary and musical production he has continued to evolve as an artist. His work has gone through many phases, from the gothic, blues-inspired post-punk sound of The Birthday Party, to the early albums of the Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, and the influence of the musicians from the Bad Seeds who have come and gone, including guitarists and collaborators such as Mick Harvey, Blixa Bargeld, and Warren Ellis. The prince of darkness has not gone without both personal and political problems, from heroin addition, the death of his son Arthur at the age of fourteen, to problematic positions on Israel and what some critics have seen as his "rampant misogyny." The Gothic post-punk sounds of The Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party, and the early Bad Seeds, have evolved to the more refined, mellow, and looped sounds characteristic of his work with his current closest collaborator Warren Ellis including the last trilogy of albums by the Bad Seeds, various film soundtracks, tours that included local children's choirs, and the recent album *Carnage*. Though "Gothic" and "post-punk" might be categories Nick Cave and other bandmates eschew, the overarching themes of love, God, death, serial killers, and the duality of an irredeemable world on fire and the hope that a track like "Push the Sky Away" inspires, indicate that Nick Cave is a romantic artist of the first order.

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The Gothic and the Romantic in Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

This article traces the influence of Gothic themes in the music, lyrics, and first novel of Nick Cave, *And the Ass Saw the Angel*. Though Nick Cave's artistic output has gone through various stages, his early work with Boys Next Door, The Birthday Party, and the nine albums released by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds between 1984 and 1996 especially demonstrate the influence of Gothic themes, and especially of the Southern Gothic mode of writing, as in the short stories of Flannery O'Connor.

KEYWORDS: Romanticism, Gothic Rock, The Grotesque, Nick Cave, Flannery O'Connor