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THE MIRROR AND A GUN: NARRATIVE ASPECTS OF NICK CAVE'S "O'MALLEY'S BAR"

Abstract

Considering the chosen ballad paradigmatic of Cave's verse narration, this paper presents a close reading of the song's lyrics that results in an analysis of narrative techniques and strategies concerning mainly the aspects of voice and perspective. Three types of narration can be recognized as systematically employed in the poem, building generically multilayered text, and pointing toward various traditions in dialog – from popular folk ballad, via Milton, Blake, Coleridge and Poe, to film and news narration.

Keywords: ballad, murder ballad, Nick Cave, narrative analysis, narrator, focalization

1. Introduction

Murder Ballads, a conceptual album by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds from 1996, their ninth in a row, is notorious of its death count – the highest in Cave's oeuvre, already abundant in death and dead. Let the numbers talk: some 65 men, women, teenagers and children, as well as one dog – they all die in many different ways. Statistically processed, it appears that every

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minute of music leads to one death (Groom 2013: 81), which brings us to 6.5 persons perishing per song, or 7.2 persons per murder ballad (the last song on the album, Dylan's "Death is Not the End", fortunately is not a *murder ballad*).¹ With regard to the brutality of the sung deaths, having in mind the impasse of the ballad narrator who enhances the roughness of the utterance, and that the verbalized scenes provoke the visual imagination of the listener, the album could easily be "X" rated due to the pornography of death, one cannot resist inquiry into why and how this particular album launched its author into the orbits of MTV fame² and commercial success.³ Browsing various articles and comments concerning this question we arrive at a number of answers and explicative hypotheses that can be sorted out into several groups. One of the hypotheses is profoundly cynical: the duet with at-the-time enormously popular Kylie Minogue was relentlessly played over all imaginable media, giving it the classical status of a hit; the supposition goes that hordes of listeners rushed to buy a vinyl or a CD, on the assumption that the song was representative and expecting the whole album to be of a similar ilk. This assumption is founded in the superficiality and lack of musical expertise of the average commercial-pop consumer; Cave himself, commenting on his albums one by one for the Australian edition of *Rolling Stone*, suspected that those who purchased the CD for Kylie would cry upon listening to it: "What the fuck have I bought this for?" (Dwyer 1998). In another type of explanation the audience seems to be treated with somewhat more respect, but not overestimated: here commentary is based on the coupling of the source – traditional folk murder ballads, orally transmitted as a mix of history and journalistic report, and printed broadside and broadsheet murder ballads, analogous to the crime pages in penny papers – and the appetite for specific narratives, fed by all those media forms acquiring an audience by elaborate and embellished naturalistic displays of violent death in its corporeal appearance and visceral effect. This link, pointing towards the inherent perverse attraction to depictions of death, seems primal as well as contemporary in its form of spectacle, a timeless *danse macabre* or *memento mori* intended for the

¹ Displayed statistics – nonetheless easily calculable – can be found on Wikipedia's page concerning the album.

² Cave's letter of rejection of the MTV award for the "best male artist", stating that he does not comply with putting his art in the competitive context – "My Muse is not a horse" – has been widely cited.

³ *Murder Ballads* had been the best selling album of the band until *Dig, Lazarus, Dig!*

triumphalism of lucky survivors. Buyers of *Murder Ballads* are, according to this explanation, a mass hungry for thrills, blood and sympathy that is the murder ballads' instrument for awakening dormant emotionality and adding spice to a monotonous life. The third type of explanation digs deeper into the domain of human needs, taking into account not only the affective and instinctual aspects of audience psychology, but also the religious and theological, spiritual and philosophic, as well as the aesthetic motives that make this album intriguing⁴ and hence desirable in a world of consumption and possession.

2. Overview

The ballad chosen to be closely analysed and interpreted here has all of the abovementioned elements or aspects: a sensationalist and shocking event, an exhaustive display of a dismembered body, inexplicable violence, and a symbolical plane where themes of freedom and morality meet, domains where God and the Devil collide, and all that in an opulent referentiality and intertextuality. More to that, this ballad exploits various narrative techniques in an intriguing manner, so that averting our eyes from the 'what' to the 'how' of the poem indicates interesting interpretive pathways and strategies.

Apart from being the longest, "O'Malley's Bar" is also formally the last *murder ballad* of the album. Nevertheless, it is seminal in a certain way: it was composed during the recording of the album *Henry's Dream*, during the tour for the next album *Let Love In*, and Cave himself, in an interview for the Australian radio station Triple J, declared that the song could not have been used for any of the existing albums, so the band "had to make a record, an environment where the songs could exist" (Walker 1995). In popular, critical or academic writing emphasis was unambiguously placed on the traditional "Stagger Lee", on the duets "Henry Lee" and "Where the Wild Roses Grow", as well as on "The Song of Joy" that was seen as a continuation of the Red Right Hand theme⁵ – while "O'Malley's Bar"

⁴ See: McCredden 2009, Rose 2013.

⁵ A phrase from Milton's *Paradise Lost* had been used in a somewhat mystic and prophetic way in a song of the same name from the previous album: the song did subsequently gain cult status in live performances, and the Red Right Hand became one of the most interpreted images and concepts in Cave's poetry.

did not provoke any serious interest. The only exception is a quite recent text about Nick Cave and the murder ballads tradition written by Nick Groom, who reserves almost two whole pages in the final part of the text for examination of “O’Malley’s Bar” in greater detail (2013: 91-92). He assumes this song to be archetypal for Cave’s treatment of the genre: this assessment approximates my estimate that “O’Malley’s Bar” is paradigmatic of Cave’s narrative mode in poetry that agglomerates various poetics from romanticism to postmodernism, together with the traditions of folklore, satire and film narration, and is also paradigmatic for a myriad of themes recurrent in his poetry. Furthermore, this ballad – being the last on the album – concludes an important phase of Cave’s artistic work:

In the recent work there has been a turning away from the theatricality and the savage irony that characterizes so much of the earlier work. The sense of splitness and fragmentation has also been lost – in terms both of the music and the lyrics – as Cave has embraced a new aesthetic. In this new work, voice is no longer something that is explored Gothically, in terms of Gothic personae, instead the voice has become that of ‘authentic’ Cave, crudely determined to express himself according to a half-baked understanding of the imperatives of the Romantic Lyric. (McEvoy 2007: 80-81)

The ballad “O’Malley’s Bar” is a story about a mass murderer, a man who enters a bar in his hometown, among familiar faces, orders a drink, and then starts killing – O’Malley, his wife, and their daughter Siobhan, then Caffrey, Mrs. Richard Holmes, as well as Mr. Richard Holmes himself, bird-face Mr. Brookes, young Richardson, Jerry Bellows, Henry Davenport, Kathleen Carpenter, and finally fat Vincent West. Triumphant in his fearful power, while he screams “Fear me!” he can no longer be seen or heard – no one is left alive. Meanwhile, fifty policemen have besieged the bar, and the killer, who had just for a moment lifted the pistol with the last bullet toward his head, obeys police orders, drops the gun, exits the bar and is shoved into a police car. While the vehicle is moving away from the crime scene, the killer finger-counts... And reaches number four. That is the number used to define a mass murderer (at least in American criminology) – a person who, in a relatively unified space and not a long stretch of time, kills more than four people.⁶ Needless to say, there are *twelve* victims – as

⁶ http://crime.about.com/od/serial/a/killer_types.htm

many as the hours in the length of daylight, months in a year, signs of the zodiac, Olympians in the Pantheon, deeds of Heracles, tribes of Israel, Christ's apostles, gates guarded by angels in New Jerusalem, books in a final version of *Paradise Lost*, jurors in the court...

3. Word by word

In a formal aspect, "O'Malley's Bar" deviates somewhat from the traditional ballad norm – alternation of iambic trimeters and tetrameters as an organizational principle of the poem is not consistently followed: verses vary in length, some catalectic and some several syllables longer than the ballad measure. However, logico-grammatical organization is based on segmentation into quatrains, and the rhyming scheme, as well as the frequency of leonine rhymes, undoubtedly connect the form with traditional balladry. On the other hand, this song does not have the refrain or incremental repetitions typical of the ballad – unless we take into account the inarticulate mumbling that five times through the song intercepts the eloquent narrator's event sequencing. The poem is autodiegetic⁷ – narrated in the first person – which is quite unusual in popular ballads.⁸ In *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* an interesting comment relates to the issue: even when the ballad is sung in the first person, the singer is fixed to his or her position of *vox populi*, whereas displayed dispositions, attitudes or prejudices do not pertain to the individual but to the community (Preminger and Brogan 1993: 116). In Romanticism, the transformative and modifying processes that the ballad endures in Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* are essentially related to the narrator: in ballads such as *Simon Lee* or *The Idiot Boy* the narrator tends to be personal and intrusive, even self-conscious, relating his individual assumptions and affections, creating distinct dynamic and dialogic tension within the ballad

⁷ The narratological terms and concepts used in this paper could be traced through Rimmon-Kenan 2002, Prince 2003, and *The Living Handbook of Narratology*.

⁸ Although the ballad narration is (in glossaries, handbooks and encyclopedias) defined by an impersonal heterodiegetic (third person) narrator, the truth is that even in the standard, canonical ballad anthologies, such as Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* or Child's collection, ballads narrated in the first person can be found.

discourse. This present, visible 'I' of Romantic poetry and, subsequently, of Romantic balladry, emerges in the initial verses of "O'Malley's Bar"⁹:

I am tall and I am thin
Of an enviable height
And I've been known to be quite handsome
In a certain angle and in certain light.

In the first quatrain the hero-narrator introduces himself to the reader/listener: this is, no doubt, an exposition of the narrative and therefore the conventional beginning of the narration. What, in fact, is out of the ordinary is that the hero presents himself as a body without a name, and does it by means of someone else's gaze. Being "quite handsome" and of "enviable height", qualifications coming from the eye outside of the (re)presented body, and including the attitudes or evaluations of the observer. The last verse bears special interest in setting forth the parameters of the image – of photography or film – positioning of the body at a certain angle in regard to the observer, as well as illumination that fashions the spectacle. The name of the hero will stay unrevealed to the reader/listener to the very end, replaced by the strong "I am" that enters the song as if taking the stage, observing oneself with the eye of the audience or with the camera eye, obviously satisfied with the sight.

As usually happens in the scant economy of ballad narration, no time is wasted on preparation or peripheral activities – action cannot wait. The protagonist enters the bar and in the next two quatrains the usual exchange of words and liquor between the bartender and the guest takes place: the bartender smiles indifferently pouring the drink, the guest smells the booze and crosses himself. The last gesture of the hero can hardly be ignored. According to the point of the action progress, as well as the setting of the event, crossing oneself is merely an automatic, habitual act pertinent to the ritual of drinking, devoid of any religious investment. But, having in mind the development of the poem in general, along with the evolution of the themes of evil, free will and morality, angelic nature and God himself in

⁹ It might be a stretch, but the repeated "I am" in Cave's song almost resonates with Coleridge's exemplification of Imagination in chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*, as the universal creative principle within the finite mind recognized as a repetition of the eternal creative act in the infinite 'I AM'. The consequences of the thus grasped concept of subjective power and freedom, in conjunction with the affirmation of the Self through imagination, are radically different in Coleridge and Cave's hero, as is to be shown.

the statements of the hero-narrator, this gesture cannot possibly be artless. Before all else, the gesture is performed with one hand, the same hand that is emancipated in the next line, starting to generate the plot of the song.

My hand decided that the time was nigh
And for a moment it slipped from view
And when it returned, it fairly burned
With confidence anew.

The hand decides – it has a will, it slips from view: it seems appropriate to ask who does actually look, by whose gaze does the narrative become visualized and from whose view does the hand disappear? When it returns, it is revived with self-confidence. The hand possesses a psychological and operational centre of its own and thus constitutes a grotesque synecdoche – a part detached stands for the whole. The grotesque implies the emotional qualities of fear and laughter: in this moment of the song it seems that the frightful prevails, although in the continuation “the wild irony” (McEvoy 2007: 80) and peculiar diabolic laughter shall accompany further cases of grotesque dissociation of the body. The hand that “burned with confidence” overwhelmingly resembles the Red Right Hand of the mighty avenging God, Jehovah of The Old Testament who restores the world order after the insurgence or the deluge.¹⁰ In the next line of the song, the hand becomes “a steely fist” that releases thunder – mark of Zeus’s divine power – so another supernal leader contributes to the potential meaning of the hand as the vehicle of tyrannical power.

Finally, the hand kills the first victim – O’Malley personally, and the execution returns the narrator’s gaze up to himself. At this point it might be useful to clarify the narrative situation in narratological terms. As occurs in every instance of first-person narration, here we see dissociation of the narrative ‘I’ into two narrative figures pertaining to different narrative levels. One is the figure of the narrator – ‘narrator I’ or *erzählendes Ich*, while the other is the figure of the protagonist – ‘character I’ or *erlebendes Ich* (Štancil 1987: 59; Prince 2003: 13, 27, 67). Both represent the same persona,

¹⁰ In Milton’s epic, the “red right hand” appears in Book II, 174, in the words of the angel Belial who announces serious repercussions for the rebellion in Heaven. Milton took the image from Horatio, where *rubente dextra* stands for Augustus’s hand that reestablished Rome after the Tiber had flooded it and denotes his imperial power (*Carmina* I, 2). The Red Right Hand is thus a hand that – although frightening – brings back structure and balance into the world.

although there might be considerable temporal disjunction between the narrating and experiencing I. This ballad employs simultaneous narration – the distance between the act and the word tends to be wiped out, so the illusion of simultaneity between the event and the reporting of it is accomplished. However, the narrator is not defined within narrative only by his temporal position and discursive activity, but also by the category of knowledge or viewpoint concerning the narrated: this issue reveals some of the compelling narrative constellations within the ballad. The narrator aims to cancel out the temporal distance toward himself as a character, so that the acting I is the same figure as the singing I. It represents an important aspect of the theatricalization of the song and its stage performance where the positions of the narrator-performer, the protagonist-killer, the victim and the observer overlap, multiply and exchange between the frontmen, the band and the audience (Groom 2013: 91; McEvoy 2007). There is a noteworthy singularity in the discursive rendering of the story in “O’Malley’s Bar” and it is related to the mode of focalization. The question “who sees?” already addressed here, is intended to locate the centre from which the materiality of the fictional world is perceived or observed. It would be only natural in a first-person narration that the viewpoint is situated within the temporally located consciousness (placed at a veritable point of fictional history) that possesses certain cognitive features, scope and potential of knowledge, specific verbal ability, style and norm of narration: the point of view would refer to a narrator designed as a natural (in a way also corporeal) human being, in accordance with the natural laws of the referential world or reality. The narrator of this murderous ballad does not comply with this scheme, primarily because his perception is not located within his body.

Groom also notices the division of the narrating subject – that “the killer is also physically disembodied [...] as well as being mentally disembodied”, and the reason is not because “he is some sort of supernatural being” – but he recognizes all those acts of dissociation as an act of alienation from the self (2013: 91).¹¹ The first killing provokes a repeated look at himself in action, and also a repeated observation about handsomeness – “in a certain angle and in a certain light”. The narrator-focalizer watches himself

¹¹ Wolfgang Kayser, in his endeavour to define the grotesque as an aesthetic phenomenon and a structure, whether defining grotesque as a compound or mixture of incongruous elements, or as a disturbed relationship between the whole and its parts, always emphasizes that the grotesque is an alienated world (Kajzer 1987: 258).

– a killer – on the stage or on the screen as the Other. This act of self-affirmation in thunder, beauty and light – all three being traits of Milton's Lucifer – has been additionally strengthened by the bang of the fist and address to the present audience in a heightened tone, calling them friends and neighbours, in a speech that reasserts the principle of love for thy neighbour, or at least absence of anger and resentment ("I bear no grudge against you!"). The appeal is accompanied by an erection, described again as a division of the phallus from 'I'. Leaving the sexual pathology of capital offenders out of the discussion, the whole scene could be interpreted as an autoerotic experience that causes an overflow of love upon the neighbours, in a sort of triumphant discovery of one's mission. Anyway, the mission is not the vengeance upon fellow-citizens for something reproachful they have done to the ballad hero and it makes an important constituent of the story-logic. The protagonist has no 'mundane' reason for his killing spree. It could be confirmed by succeeding lines, where the dismembered body reassembles itself to become a man:

I am the man for which no God waits
But for which the whole world yearns
I'm marked by darkness and by blood
And one thousand powder-burns.

A Messiah who obviously recognizes no god and preaches in the name of none, yearned by the world, represents an emblem open for interpretations that tread the lines concerning absolute freedom – freedom from logic, purpose and motivation, freedom from responsibility and from enslavement to an imposed order. The sphere of unchained individual free will, rebellion against authority, gratuitous action and hypertrophied selfhood is the domain of the Prince of Darkness, so the analogy with Milton's Satan extends. But, it needs to be clarified that this is Satan read from Milton by William Blake – marked by blood and scorched by gun-powder: he is a revolutionary, a rebel against tyranny. Anyhow, it should never be out of sight that the first-person narrator – the mighty 'I' of the speaker who addresses the guests in the bar, and indirectly readers/ listeners – is painting a self-portrait. In the seventh stanza of the ballad the second introduction of the protagonist occurs: the first was executed by the narrator communicating exclusively with the narratee/audience, painting the body by means of distanced sight, perspective and lighting, while the second is the discourse addressed to the characters in the fictional world, whereby the 'I' is situated

inside 'great chain of beings' with some additional identification marks on his bodily image.

The story proceeds as a sequence of murders, and each murder is specified by the killer's naming of the victim and adding some individualizing detail, so that the description of each killing is doubled with the murderer's knowledge about his fellow-citizens, along with observations concerning a pictorial – mostly metaphorical – aspect of the scene. O'Malley's wife looks like a fish that feeds on debris from the ocean bed, while her head, following a bullet to the chin, ends up in a sink, among the dirty dishes. The killer then swooped on the trembling Siobhan, the daughter of the barman and the local object of ridicule who spends her days in drafting the best beer in town, attacking her with sheer physical force and strangling her – while comparing her with a painted Madonna from the church wall. Caffrey was shot in a split second while he was trying to rise from the chair. Mrs. Holmes distinguished herself with a scream, so she got a vast bullet hole. The episode with Mrs. Holmes is a rare occasion where the narrator explicitly addresses the narratee ("she screamed/ You really should have heard her"), reminding us not only that a live audience is inherent to the ballad, but also that the quality of represented events requires imagination and empathy in order to be actualized as narrative fiction.

The killer now, after another passage of mumbling, starts to sing; "he is composing his ballad in the very instant of murder, the separation between representation and reality dissolves" (Groom 2013: 91). All of the agents are now present – in the text, as well as in performance: the performer who 'plays' the narrator who is also a killer, characters who are the victims, the fictitious listener of the ballad and the real audience watching the performer (and, notwithstanding, Nick Cave as the real author). The narrator-performer starts to break down, laughing, screaming, weeping and gasping. He starts a conversation with the next victim, the husband of the last fatality, who accuses the protagonist of being evil. The killer retracts:

If I have no free will then how can I
Be morally culpable, I wonder.

This segment could be considered a philosophical phase of the killing spree: the singing slayer, devoid of free will, logically infers his own innocence in a deterministic universe. The grotesqueness and sarcasm of this scene extend into a sort of nonsense humour – of the Monty Python breed –

when Mr. Richard Holmes, shot in the abdomen and knocked down on the floor, whispers an apology, surprising even the gunman who nonetheless politely accepts the apology and then calls off the conversation (turned already into a blood-choked gurgle on the side of the casualty) with a shot to the head.

After that, the assassination of another two wretched bar-lovers takes place: Mr. Brookes, whose physiognomy reminds the killer of St. Francis with the sparrows, and then Richardson whose youth suggests association with the image of St. Sebastian pierced with arrows. The metaphorization of the victims through Christian iconography styled in Medieval and Renaissance painting intensifies the pictorial aspect of the ballad that heavily operates on the framing, pose, gesture, cadre and lighting. Situating the casualties in the field of artistic interpretation of myth seems to be analogous with self-observation in the same context. Before he kills Brookes and Richardson, the protagonist continues the self-introduction that begins to acquire the form of fragmentary autofiction, disrupted by occasionally loading the gun¹² and forthcoming slaughter, finally completed somewhere at the middle of the song with the shouting out of his name:

I've lived in this town for thirty years
And to no-one I am a stranger
[...]
I said, „I want to introduce myself
And I am glad that all you came”
And I leapt upon the bar
And shouted out my name.

The performance is at its culminating point. The narrator's biographical self, the one that lives in the town and is known by every fellow-citizen, the mundane, the historical and temporal self, the one that is determined by a point in space and time in the Cartesian universe, now is being replaced by a new identity. A likely narrative that could be laid out might be about an ordinary guy squeezed by existential needs, pressed by laws and customs and overwhelmed by the structure that controls him: in such a context the lack of free will of a man in a predesigned universe, where events previously scripted take place, comes as a natural belief. The protagonist

¹² Principles of probability and *vraisemblance* are astoundingly respected: after six bullets fired (Siobhan was strangled, but Richard Holmes took two), the gun should be reloaded.

of the song, entering the bar, unleashes a libertine voluntaristic experiment – like Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* or Andre Gide’s *Lafcadio*, he undertakes gratuitous killings, showing either that he possesses will and is apt to be morally judged, or that – as he himself says – he has no free will, so cannot be culpable. The will is, it is widely acknowledged, a devil’s deed – it represents rebellion against the system, and finally a rejection of the humble self that proclaimed himself a stranger to no one. Therefore, it is inevitable for the hero to climb onto the stage, introduce himself and thank the audience for turning up for such an exquisite function. The sitting guests, along with the sprawled ones, have a rare opportunity to witness the birth of a new man, one who gods do not like, for whom the world yearns, and who reveals himself in darkness and blood, beautiful at a certain angle and under convenient light.

Please allow me to introduce myself:
I’m a man of wealth and taste
I’ve been around for a long, long year
Stole many a man’s soul and faith
[...]
Pleased to meet you,
Hope you guess my name.
But what’s puzzling you
Is the nature of my game.
[...]
Just as every cop is a criminal
And all the sinners saints
As heads is tails
Just call me Lucifer.¹³

In Cave’s case, as well as in the case of Jagger and Richards, Lucifer is a Mephistophelean figure who does “always wish Evil, and always works the Good”, who corrects the absolute tyranny of law and order, who can be aligned with the Romantic – or rather Blakean – figure of Milton’s Satan, with the functions of Prometheus and Christ juxtaposed within; that is the phase of man who rises against the father and the king, bringing along the revolution and the apocalypse that end the old world. The name of Cave’s protagonist we, as an audience, do not hear – it has been reserved

¹³ The Rolling Stones, “Sympathy for the Devil” (*Beggar’s Banquet*, 1968)

exclusively for the guests of O'Malley's bar (and every one of them has also been named). The question remains – to whom this revelation of identity above the carnage is intended: to a few left alive in the story- world, to the narratee who populates the same discursive level as the narrator, or to the audience who watches the performance or reads the lyrics. Possibly, to the murderer himself? In other words, in what degree is this ballad just a soliloquy overheard by the audience through the fourth wall?

The basic thought that the ballad, whose dominant narrative nature should not be questioned, transmutes into lyric appears after this last self-introduction of the hero – mainly in statements concerning the emotional and psychological status of the killer during the smashing of Jerry Bellows's head with a giant ashtray, in the smiling observation of the weird scene where the bullet in the chest of Henry Davenport un-seams his belly, along with the shooting at divorced Kathleen Carpenter, and before the last murder marked by another dialogue between the assassin and the victim. But, lyric fullness is finally reached in a scene where the killer kneels by the edge of a "steaming scarlet brook" sprung from Jerry Bellows's shattered head along the counter – in tears. The imagery and the lyric tone are obviously a shift from the narrative norm of the former course of the song. The space, a moment ago ruled by the murderer – dominated by his appearance and the sounds – by thunder and gunfire, by the din of breakage and smashing, by shrieks, falderal, laughter, screaming and strange, pre-linguistic, inexpressive "hhhhh mmmhm" – now becomes a *locus* of epiphany:

Well, the light in there was blinding
Full of God and ghosts of truth...

The divine light and the spectres of truth, whatever they might be,¹⁴ initiate the theme of insight, plunging into the soul of the murderer in which the first signs of remorse are perceived. The step inside and into the depths of the central subjectivity of the poem is clearly marked by contrast to the indifferent outlook of the killer who steps from the counter in cold blood and kills Kathleen Carpenter showing no remorse – although remorse overflows within him. The pangs of conscience are represented

¹⁴ The already established analogy to Coleridge could be extended, perhaps, by drawing to mind the 'machinery' of spirits and angelic hosts in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner": they appear as inhabitants inherent to Nature revealed in her true form by the imaginative eye.

in a somewhat peculiar way – as an emotion (“remorse I felt”), as a possession or an illness (“remorse I had”), as a form of matter (“it clung to everything”) and finally as a personified figure (“remorse squeezed my hand in its fraudulent claw/ with its golden hairless chest”). During these six mysterious verses remorse develops into the image of the encounter of two persons – one of the killer, with raven black hair and wings, and the other – perhaps female – with the smooth golden breast and the deceitful claw. And those tears of the kneeling killer, pausing for a moment in his spree: are those tears of fraudulent remorse? Or tears of sincere remorse overpowered by the automatism and inertia of the slaughter? The gold-breasted figure controls the black angel by coercion, so in these verses the hero becomes not only an angel (or a bird), but also the victim. There is another tiny signal of the killer’s metamorphosis into an angel and his ascent over the material world: he “*floated* down the counter” and “*glided* through the bodies” – his movements become even, continuous, weightless and ethereal – not broken and rhythmical, as the heavy human body requires. The killer soars above the earth he strode a moment ago, and his last victim, chubby Vincent West, who did not know they live in the same street, looks at him as if he sees a lunatic, before the bullet lodges in his forehead. The killer has never been recognized as crazed and deranged until this moment – it might be that Vincent West is able to see the remorse-induced eclipse in his executioner.

Apotheosis, however, does not transpire. What gets in its way is – a mirror. The killer hunts for his sight in the mirror (he literally sees his eye), and that is the continuation of the interrupted thread of metonymical dismemberment of his own body, along with the dual observation of the self-as-the-body (external focalization) and self-as-the-mind (internal focalization). The killer, who watched himself *as in the mirror* at the beginning of the song, now gazes at his own reflection, like a child before the Lacanian mirror-stage, for a long time, inquisitively, and lovingly – as beyond recognition. The autoeroticism of the first murder now culminates, as well as self-adoration, and deepens into a *mise en abyme* figure of the killer who looks at himself looking at the mirror.

There stands some kind of man, I roared
And there did, in the reflection.

Just like the Ancient Mariner, the killer stands in the midst, surrounded by dead fellow-citizens and neighbours, but – unlike the Ancient Mariner – he

does not see the dead as beautiful, but himself. There are no more eyes to confirm his power and his will, so the mirror takes over the function of the other's gaze. And in the mirror stands a portly man – hair like raven wing, muscles firm and tense, with a curl of smoke in the shape of a question mark protruding from the pistol. The gun is a legitimate part of that mighty body endowed with a powerful will and dark beauty. The helix of smoke repeats in the later circular, swivelling motions of the killer, motions that resemble dancing – ritual appropriation of territory by means of the body. He advances, saturating the void with the voice:

Fear me! Fear me! Fear me!
But no one did cause they were dead.

Alone as a god, the stern and severe owner of the vindictive red right hand, he screams until the police sirens and loudspeakers overcome. A voice modulated through the microphone repeats like a machine the phrase that appertains to every potential offender caught *in actu*. In a cinematic denouement, the last tension shall be produced again by the *hand* that raises the pistol to the head and seems almost human in that act. The bestial angel full of wrath, the dark-side Messiah, finally does not leave the scene in a blast and blood commanded by the red right hand, but – after one “long and hard think about dying” – submits himself to the will of the megaphone.

4. Types of narration

The prominent narrative features of the song have mainly been exposed through the previous analysis, and we will now up in a more systematic way. The story is rendered in a prominently episodic manner, by the consistent chronological sequencing of executions in a single physical space and in a short stretch of time. The *sjuzet* is encircled by the expositional self-presentation of the narrator-protagonist, followed by the unpromising non-dramatic and trivial action set out at the beginning, and with the public scene of an arrest placed outside the main story space at the end. The action of the song begins with the hero's entrance into the bar, and ends with his exit out of it. Naming the ballad after the location of events is not merely conventional. The interior of O'Malley's bar is a privileged space where something out of the ordinary takes place – not only the slaughter

and corporeal disintegration, but also an inexplicable destructive conquest of a seemingly impassionate killer who has not previously given away any signs of pathological behaviour. This ballad is not just a rhymed article from the newspaper crime pages about an event that increasingly frequents contemporaneity, an occurrence of metamorphosis where a meek and plain individual turns into a monster, enters a public space and liquidates everyone indiscriminately at gunpoint. What happens inside O'Malley's bar is "a theological experiment investigating moral culpability and free will" (Groom 2013: 92), endowed with precise choreography and elaborate direction. The experimenter carefully notes the experiment, along with the reactions of all the participants, paying particular attention to himself. The narrator-protagonist is at the same time a scientist and a guinea pig, he acts while perceiving what is going on around him and inside him, and in the thus obtained simultaneity, he reports. The action he performs is dual: it consists of its physical aspect – killing and moving through space from victim to victim, and its vocal aspect – the discourse composed of speech and certain other modes of vocalization, articulate and inarticulate. The main characteristic of reporting is the shift of focalization modes within the same focalizer (that is – narrator), so that the narratorial voice comes fractured into several narrative types.

One of the layers concerned with narrating the events could be characterized as objective and neutral narration that tends to render a lot of details with forensic precision, without evaluation and judgment, and subsequently with no signal of inclination or idiosyncrasy on the narrator's part. This type of narration is traditionally linked to a heterodiegetic narrator, and when it appears in autodiegesis, as is the case here, it draws attention to the narrator himself.¹⁵ The first-person narration is habitually considered more subjective, because it comes as 'natural' that the narrator should mould the story with a significant axiological, ideological and emotional imprint. Obviously, a common or habitual choice of narrative manner marks only tendencies in literary practice, usually linked to certain tradition or genre: subjectivity is only a potential and privilege of the first-person narrative, not a necessary outcome. On the other hand, when the first-person narrator generates impersonal, neutral and mechanically precise discourse (especially if it resembles focalization by means of a technical device rather than the human eye – as in *camera-eye* narration),

¹⁵ Narrators of several of Poe's stories ("The Black Cat", for instance) and Meursault of Camus's *L'Étranger* come to mind.

it tends to be interpreted as dehumanized or alienated discourse, usually rendered by the pathologically damaged anthropomorphic figure of the narrator.¹⁶ To be completely accurate, even in the described mode of narration, on several occasions in the narrative the qualifiers revealing the narrator's attitude sneak in: qualifying Mrs. O'Malley's face as "raw and vicious" or calling Caffrey "motherfucker" are the cases where hostility and aversion stand out from an otherwise neutral and indifferent report of the killings.

The detached and apathetic tone of narration that creates an impression of reliability¹⁷ is combined with content that is not rendered from the neutral observer, but from an associative, imaginative consciousness that rewrites supplements and modifies empirical data with its own sediments, establishing analogies or contrasts, and constituting metaphorically or metonymically transformed or revised images of objective reality. If we describe the first narration type as naturalistic or forensic, this would be romantic or lyric. Various fragments of imagery pertain to it – not only the young Siobhan as the Madonna painted in whale's blood and banana leaves or those two casualties that are associated with the saints, but also O'Malley's wife as a scavenger-fish, or the gush of blood as a mountain spring. It is a highly poetical and imaginative style of narration that builds upon the tropes used for the expansion and complication of the clinically presented action by the relations it provides with the objects of nature and culture and their semantic or symbolic potential.¹⁸

The third type of narration, or discursive narrative style, could be described as autofictional – although the whole ballad could be deemed autofictional. The term¹⁹ has recently gained wider popularity in literary

¹⁶ More on the topic can be found in Ann Banfield's texts about the empty deictic center.

¹⁷ Neutral discourse suggests reliability by resembling the discourses of science, especially the empiric variety, as well as the discourse of the witness in court, who is to mediate specific and exclusive directly acquired knowledge.

¹⁸ Combination, intertwining, and submersion of these two opposite styles of narrative discourse is a remarkable feature of several stories of E. A. Poe – notably "The Black Cat", "The Imp of Perverseness" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" – all about murder in first-person account by the killer. In "The Purloined Letter" detective Dupen describes his method as expanding and surpassing the logic by poetry.

¹⁹ The term was introduced by Serge Dubrowski 1977, and since then it has entered increasingly broad usage for a variety of autobiographical subgenres. It encompasses diverse works such as Montaigne's *Essais*, Rousseau's *Les Confessions*, Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Sartre's *Les Mots*.

studies, replacing the term autobiography, referring to the wider scope of narratives which tend toward auto-scripting the self as mind, soul, consciousness, selfhood or identity – thus transcending the mere autobiographical sequencing of life episodes. In “O’Malley’s Bar” the narrator-protagonist with his direct speech addressed to the people (and corpses) in the bar, as well as in his narrative discourse, in a fragmentary way, constitutes a fiction about himself that has its own fabula, juxtaposed upon the ballad story about the murder(s). First he constructs himself as a stately self who, helped by the pistol in the right hand, develops into a messianic figure expected and awaited by his fellow-men, branded in a certain way, and performing in specific postures, heroically, singing, laughing, screaming and mumbling, and who embraces his task – to activate his will to power and rebel against the order of things. In a sense, he acquires new, superhuman identity – from an insignificant fellow-citizen with no free will to the persona who, being reborn has to present himself in this new aspect. This is the figure of the thunderer, whose cold sardonic wrath culminates in the spectacle when, erected upon the counter, he promulgates his name: this image, profoundly grotesque, satirically dethronizes the prophetic display and ironizes the theological conundrum in the scene of epiphany. The absolute control that the hero has gained and displayed in that scene breaks from the inside – kneeling over the stream of blood, he wipes away the tears of remorse – a feeling that gushes beyond his control. He tries to restore the hypertrophied sense of self, boosting himself by the image in the mirror, so he sees fear in an empty, depopulated space, alone, in anti-climax, vain and void. Designing the self-portrait of ‘the handsome’ – the beautiful and powerful body – by means of describing his own appearance through the other’s eyes or through the reflection from an inanimate object (when there are no eyes to watch and see), he circumscribes and frames the central grounding of diabolic identity via prophetic discourse – the word of the seer or the bard.²⁰ Finally, with only one bullet left – that is, with the possibility of free choice of how to end this autofiction – he abstains from active participation in the denouement.

²⁰ It is hard not to draw parallels with those of William Blake’s speakers who stand for the qualities of Orc.

5. Coda

Groom's opinion is that this hero, like other protagonists of Cave's murder ballads, leaves his story without closure: "resolution is let to the legal system, to a place beyond the end of the ballad, outside the text" by which he "effectively shifts the entire literary and ballad tradition into a world governed by legal institutions and moral values rather than one oblivious of the law and humanity" (2013: 93). Other sources claim that Cave's characters are in a quest for sanctity, reaching for the sacral dimension – "the holy, divine, hierophantic, epiphanic" – in a space of human corporeality, eroticism and violence, and therefore in his songs recurrently appears "the dark, lonely figure of a man caught up in desire for a divine source or balm". The sacred then might be "part prophetic Jesus, part father in the Christian tradition, part old testament force of retribution, part metonym for human love and sexual energy, part violent power with unknown capabilities, part absence, part extension of the Cave ego" (McCredden 2009: 167, 168). The resolution of the evil hero's fate is in both types of interpretation seen as a resignation of individual power and free will, and surrender into the arms of either institutions and principles of human society, or to divine power. Either way, the origin and the nature of evil remain unquestioned, along with the satirical touch that lurks behind the dethroned spectacle presenting the battle of good and evil in an egotistic, consumerist, media-frenzied and pornophilic society. Therefore, "O'Malley's Bar" could be easily seen as a Blakean satire about the fallen man's illusion that light and darkness are somewhere outside himself, or as an ironic clash in which a tall, dark and handsome prince of darkness, "self-begot and self-raised" by his narrative, examines whether it is "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven".

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ОГЛЕДАЛО И ПИШТОЉ: АСПЕКТИ НАРАЦИЈЕ У БАЛАДИ
"O'MALLEY'S BAR" НИКА КЕЈВА

Сажетак

С полазиштем у хипотези да је одабрана балада парадигматична за Кејвово песничко приповедање, у овом раду се прво, посредством методе подробног читања, анализирају и описују приповедни поступци везани пре свега за аспекте приповедачевог гласа и погледа. Они се потом систематизују и разврставају у три типа нарације који оперишу у песми, градећи жанровски вишеслојан текст, те упућујући на различите традиције с којима се успоставља дијалог – од народне баладе, преко Милтона, Блејка, Колриџа и Поа, до нарације у филму и информативним медијима.

Кључне речи: балада, murder ballad, Ник Кејв, анализа нарације, приповедач, фокализација