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## Review of Roland Boer, *Nick Cave: A Study of Love, Death and Apocalypse*. Sheffield: Equinox, 2012.

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This is another of Roland Boer's nomadic offerings. This book, he tells us, he completed partly while on a container ship carving through the Panama Canal, and then the rest of it on the Trans-Mongolian railway. I can almost hear the rhythmic clatter in chapter 7, and see the eerie reflection of Ernst Bloch in the carriage window. I might also add that Siberia is a far cry from where I am completing this review, in a decrepit caravan in the Waitakere Ranges of West Auckland, with my loud speakers belting out Cave (if geographical context has anything to do with it; Boer seems to indicate it does [pp. viii-ix]). Nick Cave himself is also child of the world, having lived in Germany, Brazil, and London (p. 75) and this international exposure must have had a strong impact on his sound and conditioned the life experience that he transfers into his lyrics, poetry and novels. Yet, Cave's music and other creative works seem to inhabit a 'Ned Kelly' imaginary, rooted in an Antipodean cultural and geographical memory that might be symbolized by a run-down shack on the outskirts of outback Warracknabeal. This is the shack that Boer also recalls as "that house on the edge of town" (pp. 19-21). I also recall that house.

From the first, Boer warns us that the volume is going to be an intimate book (p. vii), a promise which immediately invokes curiosity about what will be shared of the past. This is both a book about Cave and a book about Boer. Music is apparently the muse which inspires a great deal of Boer's research. It is on this deeply personal musical association that Boer brings his analytical prowess to bear upon the writings of one of the most enigmatic Australian musicians of the century. Boer invites the reader into his sacred study and we are confronted by the sounds of Nick Cave and the Black Seeds, apparently "the best fucking band in the universe" (p. x, first quote in the book). Prefaced by this talk of intimacy, Boer does briefly leave his academic narrative, and shares some vignettes from his own childhood and family life. Such a book is an apt platform for such disclosures, shared histories. But this is as far as Boer goes in terms of intimacy, and to be honest I looked for more. Looking also for the signs of the film-noir impulse with which Boer lightly illustrated his book, *Knockin' on Heaven's Door*. It would not have been out of place in a book on Nick Cave who lives for these kinds of dark scenes. I had to be satisfied with Boer's laconic yet colourful recounting of Cave's lyrics and prose along with the entertaining peppering of expletives and vulgarities that seem obligatory in Boer's more popular work.

The words "Nick Cave" probably repel me ever so slightly. Having spent quite a lot of my life in Australia, geographical proximity means for semi-regular violations by Nick Cave's music. His music could be described as unpleasant yet resolute. I might have listened to him with a modicum of appreciation, perhaps drawn by the chilling and rich timbre of his voice, though tempered by disgust for the content. Cave seemed intent on killing people horribly in his music and other writings at this time. Or, in particularly insidious cases, giving the impression he had killed his characters—not being entirely clear about it, but leaving the audience with a sick suggestion of murder all the same. Nick Cave was the evil god pulling the strings of his ballads. "Where the wild roses grow", which Boer categorizes as 'sinister song' in chapter 4, is probably the most memorable ghastly Cave song (for me, though not for Boer who is a connoisseur of Cave and would point to his less mainstream and less complicit works). It is the crossing of boundaries, this mixing of love with violent death, merging into a violent love that is poignant, erotic and grotesque. Cave gives the slow and pleased, suggestive, allusive recounting of the death of the young, beautiful, vulnerable, the innocent. This is

Heathcliff on crack, a grotesque mix of images, wild roses and the chips of crushed skull. Pure Cave. It is from this abject crossing of boundaries, violence, grotesquerie that Boer develops his first category, that of 'Total Depravity'.

Boer does go about his analysis authoritatively and this cultivates an impression that he does make ground towards a systematic theology of Cave. However, there is also a sense that the authoritative slotting of Cave's oeuvre into neat categories lead by the "methodologies of select theorists" (p. xii) is defied by Cave's poetic. Boer's categories seem functional or pragmatic rather than intuitive and Cave's lyrics slop spitefully over the sides, refusing to fit neatly. The description of Nick Cave's world as "totally depraved" in chapter 2, (p. 17) is a description that I resist, and yet also concur with to a degree. Depravity is a characteristic feature of Cave's oeuvre, and Cave does regularly take it to the limit, but to describe it as Total seems too much a projection of a false absolute. The doctrine of Total Depravity fits as a workable category but not quite. There is a reasonable connection for which Boer finds supporting evidence, and yet for this reader it is not fully satisfying. There are moments of beauty that slip in and out of Cave's art: "... a wisp of light air, goodness and redemption" (p. 23). Cave's creative project in itself is a sign of life, not just death, depravity and destruction, a kind of life and death struggle. Boer does arrive at the moments in Cave's work where hope arises such as at the end of chapter 2: "all of Cave's literary work is in some sense a search for redemption" (p. 31), but doesn't the highlighting of the possibilities of 'not so total' depravity bring the validity of the category into question?

Cave projects a dystopian disillusionment with the world that could immediately associate itself with Žižek's 'monstrous other' and Boer makes this link in chapter 4 (p. 48) but goes no further. I wonder if in fact this was not a more productive line than Total Depravity that would make sense of Cave's "depraved world". Who is Cave's monstrous other? The monstrous other that exists in simultaneously in Cave, in Boer, and in me? Cave's monstrous music is a relief compared to the nauseatingly shallow offerings in mainstream music that paint over the ugly and grotesque of life and love. Certainly Boer makes this observation, panning Cave's several attempts at popular love songs as soppy, syrupy, tongue-in-cheek (p. 61). Yes, Nick Cave's twisted-up representation of love is slightly more satisfying than that, and I do agree with Cave that love can feel that horrible, even a slaughterhouse, and that Nick Cave's "depraved" lyrics and writings do in some anarchic way satisfy and identify the monstrous other that lies within the self. As Boer observes, "Not a little of Cave is to be found in Eucharist ..." (p. 26), Eucharist being an abject character in Cave's novel, *And the Ass saw the Angel*. But it is not just Cave. I think we are all at some point, somewhere deep inside at the crumbling edge of our identity, in extremis, as stunted, warped and as bestial as Eucharist Eucrow. I think there is a great deal of potential in lines of analysis that were indicated by Boer but not pursued, i.e. that of Žižekian and Lacanian theory, which is ideally located to engage with Nick Cave's music, poetry and writing. I am reminded of Lacan's analysis of Joyce's writing, given that Joyce was as close to the abyss as Cave.

Boer's engagement with death as a theme in Cave's work is compelling, aside from the overly simple identification of Cave's apparently Lacanian struggle with women (p. 48, "a woman dies"). Boer makes a vital observation when he describes Cave as contradicting the Western ethos that seeks to obliterate death by absenting it from day to day life. Cave presences death pervasively in his music and written work, and, as Boer argues, this flies in the face of social behaviours that evidence society's pathological denial of it (p. 50). I want to ask Boer, and Cave, in what way Life, in comparison, appears. Cave presences death, and he does this time and time again. Yet the creative act, the fertile act, is a signal of life. The hand that holds the gun is a live hand. Life rises up in Cave's work. He is reproductive, the music lives, he births these songs that are his grotesque children. A raw kind of life escapes his works, perhaps the animalistic, the raw urge, pure libido (as Žižek describes life utilising "Alien" as a metaphor, in *How to Read Lacan*). Boer seems to come close to this Žižekian figuring of the Real with descriptors in the chapter buzzing in a kind of sexualized

energy—jarring, interrupting, climactic, discomforting, brutal, and terrifying. Certainly, by the end of the chapter Boer sees Cave engaged in a project that reconnects death with life, or perhaps better, Cave engaged in life at its mortal edge: "... precisely through his focus on even these violent modes of death, he brings death back into play, seeing it as part of life and not separated from it ..." (p. 58).

In Biblical Literature one more often writes about the dead than the living. Writing about a 'living prophet' is something of a novelty. I found myself wondering (as does Boer), what Nick Cave might think about the book. Boer describes Cave as terminally controlling of the interpretation of his work and critiques this as the chink in his armour (pp. 13-14). Who isn't controlling of the interpretation of their own work? But this critique of Cave is particularly ironic when Boer goes on to provide a controlling interpretation of his own via a montage of his favourite theorists and a couple of other odd pairings (such as the Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity in chapter 2). Boer wonders if Cave will see his book as "Academic Wanking" (p. ix). Harsh as it is, this probably the reality, especially when it comes to analyzing someone as prolific and creative and ornery as Cave. Any conclusions drawn about such an artist are never going to be completely satisfying. Perhaps this delay or displacement of satisfaction is due to Cave's lyrics, which fail to behave in the ways Boer's categorization wishes them to. In spite of these challenges, Boer's analytical engagement with the world of Nick Cave is, as ever, a fascinating theoretical traverse. The conclusions Boer draws with his theorists are useful, constructive and provide a great deal of scope for further discussion on how we understand the ways in which artists and musicians engage with biblical literature and create theologies. The headway Boer makes into the very difficult territory of analysis of creative work, and particularly Nick Cave's creative work, contains significant successes; I dearly hope that Nick liked it.



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