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RATTLE & FILM: U2, NIETZSCHE AND SALVATION IN THE BLUES

by
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> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.
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> —Albert Camus[1]

In this essay I will discuss two radically different answers to Camus's fundamental question. Each of these answers, which find their motivation in what I shall call the blues of the human condition,[2] maintains that life is indeed worth living. The first, put forward by the late nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, infers from our wretchedness that God has died; surprisingly, though, Nietzsche finds in God's death not an occasion for despair but rather an opportunity to make one's life a thing beautiful by one's own lights. Thus, in response to the blues, Nietzsche offers a requiem—that is, a dirge or funeral song—for God as a prelude to a reassessment of values. Such revaluing, he claims, makes possible a life worth living. The other answer to Camus's question, put forward by a band of contemporary Irish theologians known as U2, sees our present darkness in the light of a kingdom yet to come, "a place that has to be believed to be seen."[3] On their view, the wretchedness of this life must be seen against the backdrop of God's grace and the hope of new life which that grace provides. In response to the blues, then, U2 offers gospel. Moreover, since their most perspicuous

[1] "The Myth of Sisyphus" in *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), 3.

[2] "Blues" music has its origin in jazz and features depressing themes, a sluggish tempo, and flatted third and seventh notes. (See Marc McCutcheon, *Descriptionary: A Thematic Dictionary*, 2nd ed. [New York, NY: Checkmark Books, 2000], p. 278.) It is therefore both a fitting metaphor and an apt medium for reflecting on themes of human wretchedness.

[3] The quotation is from U2's "Walk On," the fourth song on *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (Interscope, 2000).

presentation of gospel as a response to blues comes in the film *Rattle and Hum*, my discussion of U2 focuses on that film.[4] I will conclude by recommending U2's response over Nietzsche's.

God, some say, "is a most unwelcome guest in the world of rock 'n' roll."[5] Not so, however, for U2, known as much for their social conscience and spiritually evocative lyrics as for their distinctive, hard-driving music. Indeed, more than two and a half decades after they emerged as one of the music industry's most creative and original forces, the band's spiritual commitments—three of the four (frontman Bono, lead guitarist Edge, and drummer Larry Mullen Jr.) have been Christians since the earliest days of the band and the fourth (bassist Adam Clayton) has recently come to faith as well[6]—have taken an increasingly higher profile. So, for instance, after spending much of the 1990s dabbling in social commentary and mocking both Western consumerism and their own image as rock superstars, U2's Elevation Tour turned to such themes as "sin and redemption, heaven and hell, mercy and grace."[7] Brought to the fore in *All That You Can't Leave Behind*,[8] the release of which occasioned the Elevation Tour, these themes dominate the band's most recent album, *How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb*,[9] and the

[4]*Rattle and Hum*, directed by Phil Joanou (Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 1988). Cf. Mark Chatterton, *U2: The Ultimate Encyclopedia*, second edition (London: Firefly, 2004), s.v. 'Rattle & Hum (Feature Film/Video).' In the wake of the film, U2 also released an album entitled *Rattle and Hum* (Island, 1988); unless otherwise noted, references in what follows to *Rattle and Hum* refer to the film.

[5]Jason White, "The Spiritual Journey of U2," Religion News Service (12 February 2002), in *The U2 Reader: A Quarter Century of Commentary, Criticism, and Reviews*, ed. Hank Bordowitz (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2003), 173.

[6]See Steve Stockman, *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2* (Lake Mary, Florida: Relevant, 2001); and Michka Assayas, *Bono in Conversation with Michka Assayas* (New York: Riverhead, 2005), 44-79, esp. 64-68.

[7]Terry Mattingly, "The Scripture According to Bono," Scripps-Howard News Service (20 June 2001), in *U2 Reader*, 172.

[8]*All That You Can't Leave Behind* (Interscope, 2000).

[9]*How To Dismantle An Atomic Bomb* (Interscope, 2004)

subsequent Vertigo Tour. As a consequence, U2's concerts have come as much to resemble revival meetings or worship services as rock shows.[10]

Still, while the band's spiritual commitments have found renewed expression in recent years, I suggest that one of their most explicit expressions of faith remains *Rattle and Hum*, a full-length motion picture which chronicles the third leg of their Joshua Tree Tour and pays tribute to various legendary artists. In what follows, I develop this suggestion, providing an interpretation of *Rattle and Hum* that sees it as a presentation of Christian themes.[11] Most prominent among these are the twin themes of despair and hope—what one might call the blues of human wretchedness on the one hand and the gospel of promised redemption in Christ Jesus and his kingdom's coming on the other.

No doubt the despair arising from human misery and the hope of promised redemption and the coming kingdom will seem to some an odd pairing. Bono, however, sees the two as naturally linked. "Gospel music," he says, "is the stuff of faith. It tells you about where you are going. The blues tells you where you are."[12] And you cannot truly appreciate where you are

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[10]Cf. Mattingly, "Scripture According to Bono," 171-72; and Steve Braden, "U2's Hi-Tech Tent Revival," *America* (7 January 2002), in *U2 Reader*, 175-78.

[11]While the interpretation offered gets at what seems to me the message U2 intends *Rattle and Hum* to have, what I say below remains largely—perhaps entirely—unaffected even if it is not. For those who find this a startling claim, I note that it fits quite well with U2's own understanding, according to which human authors do not so much impart meaning to their works as discover it in them. So, for instance, "[Bono] says he is still shattered from the show two nights earlier. . . . 'Stepping back inside these songs—you know *the way these songs change meaning as they go*—they took me on a real ride'[he says]" (*Rolling Stone*, issue no. 860 [18 January 2001], 41), emphasis added; "And Bono often does not know exactly what he is writing until after he sings it. . . . [Edge] cites *Atomic Bomb's* 'Miracle Drug,' inspired by the real-life story of Christopher Nolan. . . . 'What's interesting about "Miracle Drug,"' the Edge continues, 'is that later on, Bono realized . . . "I've been doing all this work to get retro-viral drugs for Africa. I was so sure this song was just about Christy Nolan"'" (*Rolling Stone*, issue no. 964/965 [30 December 2004-13 January 2005], 62); "I find that it's only after six months of touring it and talking to different people that you get to the inner truths of the song," says Clayton, "*which is not always something Bono intended.* Gradually the sand and debris is swept away and the core is revealed" (Niall Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart: The Stories Behind Every Song* [New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2001], 58), emphasis added.

[12]Robert Hilburn, "Where Craft Ends and Spirit Begins," *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 2004; available from http://www.calendarlive.com/music/hilburn/cl-ca-hilburn8aug08,0,7106726.htmlstory; accessed 11 September 2005.

going without an awareness of where you are. “I was never tormented,” Bono says, “in the way those early rock and rollers [such as Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Marvin Gaye] were between gospel and the blues. I always saw them as parts of each other.”[13] As grace has no meaning apart from law, so also the hope of redemption has no meaning apart from human wretchedness.

Indeed, while blues without gospel leads to endless despair, gospel without blues leads to self-deception. In Bono’s words,

> The *truth* shall set you free. Gospel music is about a step of faith, which is a whole different concept. The idea is that you step into a world where, if you like, the kingdom has come. You step into it, and you affirm that. You step into that and you sing! You know, people singing gospel music, they crowded into the churches from the ghettos, to make that “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho/And the walls came tumbling down” step of faith. In their real life, they were living in leaky, rainy conditions, they were living in a sewer. So that's not the truth of their own experience.[14]

In a fallen world, to put the point differently, the truth which brings salvation includes the fact of human wretchedness. However unpleasant that fact may be, then, hope of redemption and the coming kingdom can be understood only in its light. Thus, there can be no gospel *without the blues*. “Rock ‘n’ roll, and the blues,” Bono points out, “they’re truthful. It says in the Scriptures, ‘Know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ So, there is this feeling of liberation in the blues for me. There is salvation in the blues.”[15] And, we might add, there is no salvation apart from the blues. As U2 sees it, then, one comes to hope only by way of despair; all roads to the gospel lead

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[13]Anthony DeCurtis, “Bono: The Beliefnet Interview,” 20 February 2001, available from http://www.macphisto.net/article147.html; accessed 11 September 2005.

[14]Adam Block, “Bono Bites Back,” *Mother Jones,* 1 May 1989, available from http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1989/05/bono.html; accessed 12 September 2005, emphasis in original. Arguably, this is precisely the point of Psalm 119; in a world in which nothing seems so evident as human wretchedness, God’s people nonetheless look through eyes of faith to rely upon God’s promises, the fulfillment of which culminates in the coming of his kingdom. See, for instance, Ps 119:141-176.

[15]Block, “Bono Bites Back,” available from http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1989/05/bono.html; accessed 12 September 2005.

first through the blues. Or, to put the point differently, grace offers hope only to those willing to look honestly at their world and themselves.

Of course, that one cannot arrive at gospel without blues does not mean that blues *must* lead to gospel. So, for instance, Friedrich Nietzsche's response to the blues of the human condition goes in a radically different direction. For, on his view, the appropriate encore to such blues is not gospel but rather requiem.[16] God, Nietzsche tells us, is dead. He means not that God has literally died but rather that "belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable."[17] God has not *ceased* to exist, but only for the simple reason that *he never existed in the first place.* "Which is it? is man only God's mistake," Nietzsche asks, "or God only man's mistake?"[18] His answer is that God turns out to be a mere human invention—perhaps a self-projection, perhaps a power play. St. Paul, he writes, "*understood* the need for the lie. . . . That God which Paul invented for himself, a God who 'confounds the wisdom of the world' . . . is in reality only the resolute *determination* of Paul himself to do so. . . ."[19] Elsewhere he refers to God as an "imaginary being," "an imaginary cause."[20]

God's death makes orphans of humankind. It also leaves us without purpose—meaningless cogs in the machine that is this world. For, of course, a dead deity cannot give

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[16]Hence, the madman who announces God's death finishes his work with a requiem: "It is still recounted how on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there started singing his *requiem aeternam deo.* Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but, 'What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?'" Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, poems trans. Adrian Del Caro, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), § 125, p. 120. Given the meaning that the word 'gay' has acquired in recent decades, some recent translators render this work's title *The Joyful Science.*

[17]Nietzsche, *Gay Science,* § 343, p. 199.

[18]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin), § I:7, p. 23.

[19]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* in *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin), § 47, p. 163, emphases in original.

[20]Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ,* § 15, p. 125.

purpose to our existence. And if God cannot give our lives purpose, neither can anyone (or anything) else. For a thing's having purpose involves some end which that thing is *intended* to achieve; so if no one exists to intend an end for humanity, it follows that humanity lacks purpose. Like God, then, purpose and with it divine providence turn out to be mere human inventions. Nietzsche writes,

> What alone can *our* teaching be?—That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*. . . . *No one* is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been and will be. He is *not* the result of a special design, a will, a purpose; he is not the subject of an attempt to attain an 'ideal of man' or an 'ideal of happiness' or an 'ideal of morality'—it is absurd to want to *hand over* his nature to some purpose or other. *We* invented the concept of 'purpose': in reality purpose is *lacking*.[21]

Without purpose, however, we ourselves turn out to be nothing but momentary blips on a cosmic screen. However much it offends our sense of dignity or self-worth, we enjoy neither a divine origin nor a divine destiny. Again Nietzsche writes,

> *The new fundamental feeling: our conclusive transitoriness.*—Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine *origin*: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction! One therefore now tries the opposite direction: the way mankind is *going* shall serve as proof of his grandeur and kinship with God. Alas this, too, is vain! At the end of this way stands the funeral urn of the *last* man and gravedigger. . . . However high mankind may have evolved . . . it cannot pass over into a higher order, as little as the ant and the earwig can at the end of its 'earthly course' rise up to kinship with God and eternal life. The becoming drags the has-been along behind it: why should an exception to this eternal spectacle be made on behalf of some little star or for any little species upon it![22]

So, as momentary blips destined to fade into oblivion, we have no hope of a world whose coming will give meaning to our present blues and make them worth bearing, no hope of a life

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[21]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, § VI:8, p. 54, emphases in original.

[22]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), § I:49, p. 32, emphases in original.

whose dawning will redeem the wretchedness of this one. This present darkness is not merely the *first* act of our existence; rather, it *is* the play in *all* its fullness. If one does not find what one's looking for in this life, one simply will not find it.

On Nietzsche's view, Christianity's most detrimental effect has been to obscure this fact by turning our attention from this world to another yet to come, to "an imaginary *teleology* ('the kingdom of God,' 'the Last Judgment,' 'eternal life')."[23] As Robert Solomon and Kathleen Higgins put it, "What he disliked . . . about Christianity was its 'nihilism,' its disdain and contempt for the things of this world in favor of the 'next world.'"[24] For Nietzsche, then, to look toward a world still to come or a life yet to be lived is to reject one's only opportunity truly to live—which, of course, comes here and now. In proclaiming a coming kingdom in which all things are made anew, Christianity repudiates *this* life. It makes God "the *contradiction of life,* instead of being its transfiguration and eternal *Yes*!"[25] "Life," he writes elsewhere, "is at an end where the 'kingdom of God' *begins.*"[26]

In distracting us from the darkness of this life, Christianity plays a role similar to that played by art. Art, according to Nietzsche, "makes the sight of life bearable by laying over it the veil of unclear thinking."[27] For if we were honest about the world in which we find ourselves—overflowing as it is with pointless agony, pain and suffering—we could not bear it. Here an ancient legend instructs us. King Midas seized the wood-god Silenus and forced him to tell the king what is best and most excellent for humans. "Wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance

[23]Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ,* § 15, p. 125, emphasis in original.

[24]Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *What Nietzsche* Really *Said* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 25-26. On the alleged nihilism of Christianity, see Alan Smithee, *Nihilism and the Purpose Driven Life: What does it matter anyway?* (Hollywood: Requiem, 2001).

[25]Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ,* § 18, p. 128, emphases in original.

[26]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols,* § V:4, p. 45, emphasis in original.

[27]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits,* trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), § 151, p. 82.

and tribulation," the god responds, "why do you force me to tell you the very thing which it would be most profitable for you *not* to hear? The very best thing is utterly beyond your reach[:] not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. However, the second best thing for you is: to die soon."[28] "Once truth has been seen," Nietzsche writes, "the consciousness of it prompts man to see only what is terrible or absurd in existence wherever he looks; now . . . he grasps the wisdom of the wood-god Silenus: he feels revulsion."[29] However, art obscures the truth and thereby rescues us from its debilitating effect. It thus serves as a palliative for truth. Unlike Christianity, however, art does so not by focusing our attention on an imaginary heavenly realm, but rather by ennobling us to live well here and now. "As an aesthetic phenomenon," Nietzsche tells us, "existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves."[30]

So, while U2 responds to the blues of human wretchedness with the good news of redemption and the coming kingdom, Nietzsche responds to it with a requiem for God and a repudiation of any such kingdom.[31] Salvation, on Nietzsche's view, comes not from God's willingness to become one of us, but rather from our power to transform ourselves into gods. If Nietzsche offers redemption, it comes not via the cross but rather power; if he offers absolution, it comes not via self-denial but rather self-assertion. Life in its ultimate fullness belongs only to those willing to exercise their own will to power. "'Exploitation' does not belong to a corrupted or imperfect, primitive society," Nietzsche writes, "it belongs to the *essence* of being alive as a

[28]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, trans. Ronald Speirs, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), § 3, pp. 22-23, emphases in original.

[29]Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, § 7, p. 40.

[30]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 107, p. 104, emphases in original.

[31]While U2 sings, "You glorify the past when the future dries up," Nietzsche accuses Christians of glorifying the future to obscure the present. The quotation is from "God Part II," *Rattle and Hum* (Island, 1988).

fundamental organic function; it is a result of genuine will to power, which is just the will of life."[32] Nietzsche and U2 thus offer radically different responses to our present, miserable condition. In what follows, I discuss these responses in more detail.

Blues and Gospel: Human Wretchedness Redeemed

As *Rattle and Hum* opens, Bono introduces its first song, announcing, "This song Charles Manson stole from the Beatles; we're stealing it back." The song, of course, is "Helter Skelter," first released on what is popularly known as the Beatles' *White Album*,[33] and perhaps the most ill-fated song in the history of rock music. For, as Bono's introduction indicates, it has become permanently linked to Charles Manson and the infamous Tate/LaBianca murders.[34] Over two nights in August 1969, Manson directed his followers to murder eight people, including Sharon Tate, actress and wife of film director Roman Polanski, and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. Tate, who was eight months pregnant, was found dead along with four guests at her home in Beverly Hills; the LaBiancas were later found dead in their Los Angeles home. The connection with the Beatles' song stems from the fact that Manson claimed the *White Album* as an encoded message to himself—a message prophesying a coming race war to be known as "Helter Skelter." That U2 chose to open *Rattle and Hum* with a Beatles' song underscores their appreciation of the Liverpudlian band.[35] But the choice of "Helter Skelter" and the remark about Manson cannot fail

[32]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Hosrtmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), § 259, p. 153, emphasis in original. Elsewhere he writes: "The first effect of happiness is *the feeling of power*: this wants to *express itself*, either to us ourselves, or to other men, or to ideas or imaginary beings." See Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, § IV:356, p. 166.

[33]Its actual title is simply *The Beatles* (Apple, 1968).

[34]For an account of the murders, see Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[35]The Beatles hail from Liverpool, England, and are thus Liverpudlians.

to evoke memories of the brutality and savagery of the Tate/LaBianca murders. And it seems an especially effective means of pointing the film's viewer to the sad reality of the human condition.

Of course, the sadness to which "Helter Skelter" points is twofold. First, and most obviously, it points to the wickedness that pervades our world. Manson and his disciples embody an all-too-common evil—one characterized by a willingness to exert one's will no matter what the consequences may be for others. It is, in short, Nietzsche's unrestrained "will to power." Second, and less obviously, the song points to the vulnerability of innocence in a world marked by injustice. For, of course, whatever else might be true about Tate, her unborn child, guests and the LaBiancas, they did not deserve what they got. And this points to yet another aspect of our wretched condition—the innocent suffer while the wicked prosper. "There is a vanity that takes place on earth," the author of Ecclesiastes tells us, "that there are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous" (Eccles 8:14).[36]

On the heels of "Helter Skelter"—the performance of which comes in the stark black-and-white that dominates the film until its climax with "Where the Streets Have No Name"—Edge performs his own "Van Diemen's Land," his solitary guitar contrasting dramatically with the frenetic, hard-driving energy of "Helter Skelter." The song's title refers to the former penal colony now known as Tasmania.[37] Its speaker faces exile in Van Diemen's land, separated from those whom he loves, because he fought for justice rather than for personal gain. So, while "Helter Skelter" reminds us that the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper, "Van Diemen's

[36]Cf. Job 9:23-24, 21:7-26; Ps 73:2-14, 94:3-7; and Hab 1:1-4,13.

[37]Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart*, 80. Niall Stokes is a leading advocate of contemporary Irish music and the founder of Dublin-based *Hot Press*, which has been characterized as "the first serious Irish journal" to concentrate on such music. *Hot Press* was also the first journal to give serious attention to U2 and accounted for much of the band's early publicity. See Chatterton, *U2: The Ultimate Encyclopedia*, s.v. 'Hot Press' and 'Stokes, Niall.'

Land" paints for us a portrait of one who sows justice for others only to reap injustice for himself. Significantly, however, it does not leave us in utter despair; for the final verse anticipates a day when justice reigns, a day "when an honest man sees an honest wage." And, as we shall see, this theme of a day yet to come when justice will reign echoes throughout the film.

After "Van Diemen's Land," we see U2 talking with the film's director, Phil Joanou. "What," Joanou asks, "has happened between the writing of the *Joshua Tree* album . . . and the tour and now the new songs?" The band hesitates and, with no response having been made, the film immediately takes us to a performance of "Desire"—apparently leaving the question unanswered. Here one's attention is drawn to what is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the human condition—namely, one's own individual wretchedness, with its concrete particularity. Thus far the wretchedness singled out in the film arises from external sources. "Desire," however, points to that which comes from within oneself. This song functions, then, as a sort of confession by the band in response to Joanou's question. The song reflects a desire that increases in intensity like a slowly rising fever that cannot be assuaged: "And the fever/Getting higher/Desire, desire/Burning, burning." The sense of losing one's self-control climaxes as the camera spins rapidly in a circle, creating a blur of images. It thus recalls St. Paul's lament of his own weakness: "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing" (Rom 7:18-19).

As desire can drive one to self-loathing, so despair can drive one to self-destruction. "Exit," which follows "Desire," "gets inside the head of a protagonist who's careening into psychosis."[38] The song, whose dark imagery and tone are expressed visually in Joanou's use of

[38]Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart,* 76.

shadow, conveys "the state of mind of someone driven, by whatever powerful urges, to the very brink of desperation."[39] Whether the fruit of that desperation turns out to be murder or suicide the song leaves unclear, although the song's title makes the latter seem more likely.[40] In either case, however, the repeated references to "the hands of love"—hands that, we are told, can both build and pull down—bring to mind a biblical theme. Here God's words to Jeremiah are relevant: "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer 1:9b-10).

The hands that build, as U2 says, can also pull down. Niall Stokes sees the band's recognition of this as reflecting "a new awareness [on their part] of the dangers of fanaticism implicit in faith."[41] The song's protagonist, however, is *not* a believer (e.g. "he wanted to believe in the hands of love" but apparently was unable to do so), so this is unlikely. Moreover, the point may be put the other way round; the hands that pull down also can build. In fact, this ordering reflects not only Jeremiah 1 but also a later text that goes as follows: "And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD" (Jer 31:28). This text clearly foreshadows the coming of Christ and his kingdom; for, as a few lines later indicate, "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . But this is the covenant that I will make with the

[39]Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart,* 76.

[40]Even the author of the song's lyrics claims not to know himself. According to Stokes, Bono says, "'Exit'—I don't even know what the act is in that song. Some see it as a murder, others suicide—and I don't mind. But the rhythm of the words is nearly as important in conveying the state of mind." Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart,* 76.

[41]Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart,* 76. In light of texts quoted below, I take the description of love's hands as both building and pulling down to reflect the fact that some find redemption and salvation in God while others find condemnation and destruction.

house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer 31:31,33). In "Exit" I take it that 'the hands of love' refer to the hands of God.[42] If I am right about this, the song's protagonist wanted to believe in God but could not bring himself to do so. Unbelieving, he careens "into psychosis." Blues without gospel thus leads not simply to unending despair but ultimately to self-destruction.

The finale of "Exit" incorporates the chorus of Van Morrison's "Gloria." So, as in "Van Diemen's Land," we are not left in utter despair. For, however briefly, we are reminded that God's promise to Jeremiah has been fulfilled in Christ Jesus. In the Latin Vulgate, the word *gloria* begins the angelic celebration of Christ's advent recorded in Luke 2:14.[43] For, as the song ends, the film shows Bono from behind striking the pose of one on a cross, underscoring the song's suggestion of hope and redemption—which, as the singer's pose indicates, come by way of sacrifice.

Thus far, then, the film concerns wretchedness arising both externally and internally. Injustice inevitably brings misery to both its victims and its perpetrators. That which it brings on its perpetrators arises from within them and thus seems more troubling. As Plato says, it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it.[44] Left unchecked, moreover, wretchedness arising from within leads ultimately to self-destruction. Still, the film affords a glimpse of that day when

[42]The album *Rattle and Hum* contains numerous references to "love" which also seem to be rather thinly veiled references to God. So, for instance, in "Love Rescue Me" (which sounds like an angst ridden "Love Lifted Me"), "When Love Comes to Town," and "God Part II" (in which the speaker repeatedly affirms his belief in love), 'love' almost certainly refers to God.

[43]The incorporation of Van Morrison's song into "Exit" brings to mind U2's own "Gloria," which also includes phrases borrowed from the Latin Vulgate. So, for instance, the phrases *in te domine* and *exultate* introduce Psalms 30 and 32, respectively; in most English translations (including the English Standard Version), these are Psalms 31 and 33, respectively. U2's "Gloria" is the first song on *October* (Island, 1981).

[44]See, for example, Plato's *Apology* 30c-e, 41d-e; and *Theaetetus* 176a-177a. These passages can be found in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1997), pp. 28, 36, and 195-96, respectively.

justice will reign and the hands of love will build rather than pull down, when God's law will be written on neither tablets of stone nor hearts of clay but rather on hearts of flesh belonging to the people of God. In offering such a glimpse, "Gloria" is a prelude to what may well be U2's most misunderstood song—"I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For."

Between "Desire" and "Exit," Joanou asks the band, "What's this film about?"

"It's sort of a musical journey, really, you know?" responds Mullen. "Sounds good."

As the band laughs at Mullen's response, Bono says, "I was a little worried there for a second."

"It's a musical journey," Mullen repeats. "That's really what it is."

Clayton then gives his own rambling answer to the question, eventually saying that U2 "just wanted to capture this period of the band." He is not yet finished responding to Joanou's question when he notices Mullen mocking his hand gestures and he cuts his answer short as the other band members laugh, apparently taking the question less seriously than Joanou intended it.

"What's the film about?" Joanou asks again.

"It's a musical journey," Mullen says for the third time, as the band continues to laugh.

"It's about music—I hope," offers Edge.

This exchange is noteworthy. First, Bono, the band's spokesman, does not provide an answer to Joanou's question, though each of the other band members does. Second, while not logically incompatible, their responses differ significantly. Third, U2 appears to take neither the question nor its own response to it seriously; indeed, they laugh through much of the exchange. Finally, Bono says elsewhere, "The film was about music, and *in that music was everything that we have to say and offer*. Now people want it made easy for them. They want it spelled out. Why

can't people just accept the music?"[45] Certainly, *Rattle and Hum* is, among other things, a tribute to several legendary artists, including the Beatles, Bob Dylan, B. B. King, Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix. And it certainly evidences U2's fascination with America—both its culture in general and its music in particular. But Bono's comments are instructive: *If* the film has an agenda, it will be found *in the music*—where, Bono says, one can find *all* U2 has to say and offer.

Before the film moves to "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For," Edge describes it as "a gospel song." "I mean, it doesn't sound much like a gospel song the way we do it," he admits, "but if you look at the lyric and the basic music, that's exactly what it is." As if to underscore these remarks, the film shows U2 performing the song with—as Edge tells us—a gospel choir at a church in Harlem. Some see this song as a repudiation of the faith. If the members of U2 have yet to find what they seek, the thinking goes, they must have weighed Christianity and found it wanting; for how could a Christian say that he has *not* found what he seeks?[46] Significantly, however, Edge characterizes the song as gospel rather than blues. Moreover, the song itself explicitly affirms the speaker's faith: "I believe," the speaker insists, "in the kingdom come." Although the lines are left out of the filmed performance, the song also affirms that Christ has broken the bonds and loosed the chains that imprison us, taking the speaker's shame on himself. In light of this, I suggest that, far from repudiating the faith, "I Still

[45]Block, "Bono Bites Back," available from http://www.motherjones.com/arts/qa/1989/05/bono.html; accessed 12 September 2005; emphasis added.

[46]On such misunderstanding, John Smith writes: "Shallow souls on Christian and secular fronts totally missed the point of 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For.' For the shallow opponents of Christianity it served as a departure from sermonizing faith. For fundamentalists, who neither understood nor empathized with the Lord's Prayer (Thy Kingdom Come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven!), they had betrayed the simplistic slogan of 'Jesus is the answer,' failing to enter into the Christ-like agony of a world so racked with Divinely rejected injustice, loneliness, corruption. That the song reaffirmed Christ's vicarious embracing of our guilt and sin and reasserted the declaration of faith ('You know I believe it') was overlooked in a frenzy of Sunday school responses." John Smith, "The New U2," *On Being* (November 1993), in *U2 Reader,* 180.

Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" reaffirms it, and that what the speaker seeks is the kingdom of God. In other words, I take the song to be a plea for the coming of Christ's kingdom.[47] Indeed, Bono has said that the kingdom "is taken by force," that "God doesn't mind if we bang on the door to heaven sometimes, asking him to listen to what we have to say. . . ."[48] In this he seems to mirror the Psalmist's outlook. Far from repudiating it, then, the song anticipates the fulfillment of promised redemption and thus presupposes an enduring faith.

That the kingdom has not yet come is obvious given the wretchedness of our present condition. For, as mentioned above, the mark of the coming kingdom is justice. As the song indicates, when the kingdom comes, "all the colors will bleed into one." To the extent that injustice remains, then, we are assured that the kingdom has not yet come. The two songs that follow—"Freedom For My People" and "Silver and Gold"—emphasize present injustice. "Freedom For My People"—which, along with Jimi Hendrix's instrumental version of "The Star-Spangled Banner," is one of two songs in the film not performed by U2[49]—prefaces "Silver and Gold."

"Silver and Gold" is a simple but poignant plea for freedom and racial justice. To ensure that this is not missed, Bono addresses the audience during the song as the rest of the band continues to play: "It's a song written about a man in a shanty town outside of Johannesburg, a man who's sick of looking down the barrel of white South Africa." Sadly, such injustice includes oppression perpetrated by religious believers. Moreover, the speaker's plea to Jesus for help indicates that he also is a religious believer. The subject of religious believers victimizing one

[47]Cf. Phil 3:20-21.

[48]Mattingly, "Scripture According to Bono," 173.

[49]"Freedom For People"—written by Macie Mabins, Sterling Magee and Bobby Robinson—is performed in the film by Adam Gussow and Sterling Magee; Jimi Hendrix's performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" is from the Woodstock Festival of 1969.

another—indeed, of Christians victimizing Christians—comes up again toward the end of the film when U2 performs "Sunday Bloody Sunday." Like "Van Diemen's Land," however, "Silver and Gold" provides hope: neither chains nor shackles ultimately bind the speaker; freedom belongs to the oppressed, not to their oppressors. Yet again, the point is that those who commit injustice harm themselves more than those who suffer it. As Christ says, "do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28). So, then, those who commit injustice become prisoners of their own wickedness; those who suffer injustice find hope in the coming of Christ's kingdom, when all things will be made anew.

After "Silver and Gold," the setting shifts to Sun Studios in Memphis for "Angel of Harlem" and then to San Francisco for "All Along the Watchtower." The angel to whom the first song refers is Billie Holiday, the great jazz singer whose slow deterioration into drug and alcohol abuse led to an early death. Of her "luminous self-destruction," Elisabeth Hardwick writes, "The sheer enormity of her vices. The outrageousness of them. . . . Onto the heaviest addiction to heroin she piled up the rocks of her tomb with a prodigiousness of Scotch and brandy. She was never at any hour of the day or night free . . . except when she was asleep. And there did not seem to be any pleading need to quit, to modify."[50] A tribute to Holiday, "Angel of Harlem" laments her self-destruction. Interestingly, as the camera moves from one band member to another during the song, we see on the wall behind them large pictures of Elvis Presley, who made many of his early recordings at Sun Studios. Like Holiday, Elvis is almost as famous for his self-destruction as for his music.

[50]Elisabeth Hardwick, "Billie Holiday," *The New York Review*, 4 March 1976; available from http://www.ladyday.net; accessed 3 October 2005.

Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" presents us with a conversation between a "joker" and a "thief." The joker desires to escape his situation, which apparently involves chaos and injustice. The thief counsels patience—for while some believe life is meaningless, they do not; moreover, some sort of end approaches. The song—as Dylan wrote it—ends with a reference to a growling cat and two riders who approach the tower. Given this reference, some see in the song an echo of Isaiah 21:8-9: "Then he who saw cried out: 'Upon a watchtower I stand, O Lord, continually by day, and at my post I am stationed whole nights. And behold, here come riders, horsemen in pairs!' And he answered, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground.'"[51] This passage obviously concerns judgment. So, as we listen to the song, we seem to overhear an exchange between two down-and-out individuals who find their present situations almost unbearable. What allows the thief to counsel patience, however, is his understanding that life has a purpose together with the lateness of the hour. Perhaps the lateness of the hour means that a new dawn approaches. In any case, two horsemen approach—an image that, in light of Isaiah's words, seems apocalyptic.

Interestingly, U2 replaces the lines mentioning the cat and two riders with: "All I got is a red guitar/Three chords/And the truth/All I got is a red guitar/The rest is up to you."[52] The reference to three chords alludes to Curtis Mayfield's "People Get Ready"; Edge had once told Bono that that song's three chords "could change the world."[53] U2 often performed the song, which concerns the coming of Christ's kingdom, during the Joshua Tree Tour. Apparently, then,

[51]I am not alone in seeing such an echo; cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_Along_the_Watchtower; accessed 5 October 2005. In the Masoretic text, the first line of verse 8 states either "Then a lion cried out" or "Then he cried out like a lion."

[52]To prevent the horsemen from dropping out of the song altogether, however, they also modify another line: "While all the women came and went/Barefoot servants, too" becomes "While horsemen came and went/Barefoot servants, too."

[53]Dianne Ebertt Beeaff, A *Grand Madness: Ten Years on the Road with U2* (Tucson: Hawkmoon, 2000), 19.

the truth that Bono claims to have in "All Along the Watchtower" concerns the coming of the kingdom; and, given its apocalyptic imagery and the suggestion of a new day approaching when the down-and-out will find relief, this fits the song's motif.

The film's next three songs return the viewer's attention to the human condition. Two of them, "In God's Country" and "Heartland," also illustrate U2's ambivalence toward the United States. "America both fascinates and frightens me," Bono has said. "I can't get it out of my system. . . ."[54] "In God's Country" portrays America as both savior and seductress. So, while she has much to offer, not all of it is good. While "Heartland" presents a more favorable view of America, its performance accompanies film of the band visiting Graceland, Elvis's home in Memphis, Tennessee. Of course, Elvis—an unusually gifted singer whose success led ultimately to his own destruction—exemplifies both the charm and the corruption of American culture. With "Heartland" playing in the background, Mullen says of the visit, "I was a little bit disturbed by going to Graceland. When I got there, I enjoyed it and all that, but seeing the graves . . . it seemed very distant. I wish he hadn't been buried in there, in the back garden." While Elvis's success is evident in the house and on the grounds, so also is his excess.

Between "Heartland" and "In God's Country," we see U2 and B. B. King discussing and rehearsing "When Love Comes to Town," a song about regret and repentance. In it, the speaker laments wrongs he did "before love came to town."[55] Here, as in "Exit," "love" clearly refers to God, specifically to Jesus Christ. A backstage conversation prepares us for the song. "Right, with the B. B. King song," Bono says, "watch for the third verse. Not the first verse, the first chorus; not the second verse; but the third verse which comes after the chorus." We then see a

[54]Stokes, *U2 Into the Heart,* 90.

[55]Perhaps the song's most poignant regret involves promises, made to a lover, that the speaker "was soon to forget," leaving her standing alone at the altar.

conversation between Bono and King. “I hope,” Bono says, “you liked the song.” King responds, “I love the song. I think that the lyric is really—*real* heavy lyrics. You’re mighty young to write such heavy lyrics.” So before the song begins, the film draws our attention to its lyrics, especially its third verse. And when the performance gets to that verse, the film cuts to a conversation in which Bono reviews the lyrics with King. Instead of hearing the third verse being sung, we hear Bono speak it. This draws our attention to the content of that verse, which tells us that the speaker “threw the dice” as Christ’s side was pierced during the crucifixion. But he also saw “love conquer the great divide.” So, then, “When Love Comes to Town” includes both an admission of wretchedness and a confession of hope, specifically Christian hope. It is both a lament and a celebration—a lament of wrongs done, a celebration of redemption in Christ.

As the film nears its climax, it moves to “Bad,” a song about heroin addiction.[56] Significantly, it begins on the heels of Mullen’s comments about Elvis and Graceland. As we hear the first strains of “Bad,” we see him at Elvis’s grave, looking at the eternal flame and tombstone. Elvis died as a result of a drug overdose. So the film moves from this famous casualty of drug abuse to a song filled with empathy for one struggling with such abuse. The speaker anguishes over someone tormented by addiction but beyond his help. He says that, if it were possible, he would free the addict from his bondage. When he begins singing, Bono is silhouetted; we see his outline, but he remains in shadow. As with “Exit,” the film uses shadow to establish a dark, brooding mood. Although Bono comes into the light (as the speaker longs to see the addict do), the other band members remain obscured by shadow for much of the song. In the context of a film that emphasizes the twin themes of despair and hope, drug addiction serves as a metaphor for the desperation we face more broadly, especially that which arises from within.

[56]See Laura Jackson, *Bono: His Life, Music, and Passions* (New York: Citadel, 2001), 56.

Toward the end of "Bad," U2 pays tribute to the Rolling Stones, incorporating lines from "Ruby Tuesday" and "Sympathy for the Devil." "Ruby Tuesday" is about a groupie who longs for freedom but pays rather a high price for it. Written from its title character's point of view, "Sympathy for the Devil" portrays Lucifer—who also has paid rather a high a price for personal autonomy—taking credit for various instances of injustice and oppression; or perhaps the song means to identify those responsible for such misdeeds as devils. In either case, the song recalls images of man's inhumanity to man.

Although it has given us glimpses of gospel, *Rattle and Hum* has thus far stressed the blues. From "Helter Skelter" to "Bad," the film has focused our attention on wretchedness. Christ's kingdom receives mention, but only secondarily. And while references to the kingdom anticipate freedom from bondage—whether self-imposed or the result of injustice—they are fleeting, passing quickly in the face of this present darkness. But with "Where the Streets Have No Name," the film climaxes as the emphasis shifts from blues to gospel, from despair to hope, from wretchedness to redemption.

As "Bad" ends, the screen fades to black for the first and only time in the film. When the picture returns, the visual impact is stunning. Red radiates from the screen like a sunrise, like the dawning of a new day. "Where the Streets Have No Name" begins gently, softly. As Edge begins its familiar introduction on guitar, lights flash, illuminating the stage. An overhead shot shows the venue, Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, Arizona. And then come the lyrics. The city of which they speak is, I suggest, the heavenly city of which St. John writes, "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. . ." (Rev 22:1-2).[57] In short, the song concerns the

[57]See also Rev 21:21: "And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass."

heavenly city, “a place high on a desert plain.” And in that place God’s people will be afflicted no more—for there will be no more bondage, no more doubt, no more injustice, no more war. Thus, with the author of Hebrews, U2 seeks “the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14).

As mentioned above, the mark of the kingdom is justice. So as the kingdom comes, those who work for justice see their dreams realized. “Where the Streets Have No Name” is followed by a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., entitled “MLK.” Here we see Bono silhouetted against a bright light. Although the film has not reverted to the black-and-white that dominated it prior to “Where the Streets Have No Name,” we cannot discern the color of the singer’s skin. Of course, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” anticipates the day of the kingdom’s coming when “all the colors will bleed into one”; and King himself dreamed of the day when his children would be judged not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”[58] The silhouetting of the singer thus contributes to a sense of expectation as we hear “MLK.” Working with the motif made famous by King’s speech delivered 28 August 1963 in Washington D.C., Bono sings, “And may your dreams be realized.” But, of course, those dreams will be realized only at the advent of Christ’s kingdom. For they envision a day when valleys are exalted and mountains debased, when rough places are made plain and crooked places straight—when, as scripture says, “the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it” (Is 40:4-5). And such a day will not come until Christ himself returns.

After “MLK,” though gospel continues to be an important theme, the film’s emphasis shifts back to the blues. “With or Without You” brings into view the fragility of human relationships. In apparent frustration, the speaker complains that, though he continually gives himself away for the sake of others, he can live neither with nor without them. As the song nears

[58]The quotation is from the speech delivered by King in Washington D.C. on 28 August 1963. Both audio and transcription of that speech can be found at the web site of History and Politics Out Loud: http://www.hpol.org/record.php?id=72, accessed 25 February 2006.

its conclusion, Bono inserts into it three lines which do not appear in its studio version: “We’ll shine like stars in the summer night/We’ll shine like stars in the winter light/One heart, one hope, one love.” Of course, the last of these lines echoes the last verse of 1 Corinthians 13: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” So, while the song reminds us of the blues, it nonetheless leaves us with hope.

Interestingly, from this point on, religion plays a prominent role in the wretchedness of which the film speaks. So, for instance, “Bullet the Blue Sky” rebukes “a preacher on the Old Time Gospel Hour stealing money from the sick and the old”; “Sunday Bloody Sunday” concerns the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland—a conflict which has Christians killing Christians in Christ’s name. U2 performs the song just after learning of a bombing in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland, which left eleven dead. As a consequence, the performance—filmed in the bleak black-and-white which dominates the movie through the performance of “Bad”—is unusually intense; and, in the film’s most moving scene, Bono pauses during the song to deliver a stinging rebuke of those who support such terrorist acts.[59] The song itself both repudiates sectarian violence and pleads for unity.

Having focused our attention on the hatred out of which such violence arises, the film concludes with “Pride (In the Name of Love)”, a tribute to those who sacrifice themselves in order to liberate others from bondage. Chief among those to whom the song pays tribute are Martin Luther King Jr. (“Free at last, they took your life/They could not take your pride”) and Jesus Christ (“One man come, he to justify” and “One man betrayed by a kiss”). As Christ himself tells us, there is no greater love than that which sacrifices itself (Jn 15:13). Here, as in “When Love Comes to Town,” “love” almost certainly refers to God. Thus, the song suggests

[59]See Chatterton, *U2: The Ultimate Encyclopedia,* s.v. ‘“Sunday Bloody Sunday” (Live) (*Rattle & Hum* Film/Video Track).’

that those who serve God do so not by seeking power for themselves but rather by sacrificing themselves for others.

As I understand it, then, *Rattle and Hum* turns our attention to the blues of the human condition. While "Helter Skelter" and "Van Diemen's Land" bring to mind blues arising from the wickedness of others, "Desire" draws attention to the blues arising from our own wretchedness. Ultimately, as "Exit" illustrates, such wretchedness leads to self-destruction. Even so, we find hope in the promised kingdom of God; "Gloria" celebrates the coming of Jesus of Nazareth upon whom that promise rests. So we live in the tension between blues and gospel, acknowledging faith in Christ and yet longing for his return. Of course, to long for his return is also to long for justice, which—as "Freedom for My People" and "Silver and Gold" remind us—we do not now enjoy. Like the speaker in "When Love Comes to Town," we gain entrance into the kingdom via repentance. Sadly, as "Bad" points out, we cannot set others free from bondage, however much we desire to do so.[60] Still, the invitation to repent remains open; and those who accept it will walk the streets which have no name. Even so, they will struggle with their own wretchedness until Christ's kingdom comes in its fullness (Rom 7). Until then, we can do no better than humble ourselves for the sake of others (Phil 2:3-4). Or, as I understand them, so says U2.

Blues and Requiem: Human Wretchedness Embraced

Now, as we have seen, Nietzsche responds to our miserable condition with a proclamation of God's death—a proclamation in which he delights. "Indeed, at hearing the news that 'the old god is dead,'" he writes, "we philosophers and 'free spirits' feel illuminated by a

[60]Cf. St. Paul's desire to free his countrymen from bondage even at great cost to himself: "I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh" (Rom 9:1-3).

new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation. . . ."[61] The "new dawn" occasioned by God's death brings a sort of liberation, a freedom from accountability.

> That no one is any longer made accountable, that the kind of being manifested cannot be traced back to a *causa prima*, that the world is a unity neither as sensorium nor as 'spirit,' *this alone is the great liberation*—thus alone is the *innocence* of becoming restored. . . . The concept 'God' has hitherto been the greatest *objection* to existence. . . . We deny God; in denying God, we deny accountability: only by doing *that* do we redeem the world.[62]

With God dead, then, we are free to be our own masters.[63]

Prior to God's demise, Nietzsche suggests, we were like castaways stranded on an island, with few possibilities open to us. But denying God allows us to set sail with a clear and limitless horizon before us: "finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an 'open sea.'"[64] Elsewhere, he writes,

> We have forsaken the land and gone to sea! We have destroyed the bridge behind us—more so, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean; it is true, it does not always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. . . . Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more *freedom* there—and there is no more 'land'![65]

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[61]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 343, p. 199.

[62]Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Gods*, § VI:8, p. 54, emphases in original.

[63]The following passage hints at this: "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of the deed not too great for us? *Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?"* Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 125, p. 120, emphasis added.

[64]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 343, p. 199, emphasis in original.

[65]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 124, p. 119, emphasis in original.

So, before God died, we lived with a false view of the world—one according to which divine providence works all things "together for good."[66] Since such a view carried with it a divinely appointed morality, we thus found ourselves constrained, bound to live according to a morality based on error. But, having rejected that view as false, we are now free to pursue life in whatever way pleases us.

Moreover, on Nietzsche's account of things, what most pleases humankind is power. "Not necessity, not desire—no, the love of power is the demon of men," he writes. "Let them have everything . . . they are and remain unhappy and low-spirited: for the demon . . . *will* be satisfied. Take everything from them and satisfy this, and they are almost happy—as happy as men and demons can be."[67] This leads to a reassessment of values.

> What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.
> What is bad? – All that proceeds from weakness.
> What is happiness? – The feeling that power *increases*—that a resistance is overcome.[68]

Belief in God—with its attendant morality—leads to the devaluing of strength in favor of weakness. In Christianity in particular, Nietzsche sees a decadent religion, one which elevates the lowly above the lordly. Having "taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life. . . ."[69] So, as he sees it, belief in God—especially *Christian* belief—leads to an inversion of values. Hence, the

[66]Cf. Rom 8:28. Of philosophers and 'free spirits,' Nietzsche's remarks: "We have become hard-boiled, cold, and tough in the realization that the way of the world is not at all divine—even by human standards it is not rational, merciful, or just. We know it: the world we live in is ungodly, immoral, 'inhuman'; for far too long we have interpreted it falsely and mendaciously. . . ." See his *Gay Science,* § 346, pp. 203-4.

[67]Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* § IV:262, p. 146, emphasis added.

[68]Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ,* § 2, p. 115, emphasis in original.

[69]Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ,* § 5, p. 117, emphasis in original.

rejection of such belief opens the way for a reassessment of values; and such revaluing places strength in a position of honor and thus legitimizes humankind's love of power.

So, as Nietzsche sees it, God's death frees us to pursue whatever end pleases us. No deity exists to hold us accountable to a divinely sanctioned morality; and, without the artificial constraints of a false religion and its attendant morality and values to bind us, nothing stands between us and the unrestrained pursuit of what we naturally love above all else—to wit, power. No doubt some, concerned about the potential for exploitation which it entails, will balk at such a pursuit. But, as we have already seen, Nietzsche sees exploitation as essential to life. "It is just as absurd," he writes, "to ask strength *not* to express itself as strength, *not* to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master, [*not*] to be a thirst for enemies, resistance and triumphs, as it is to ask weakness to express itself as strength."[70]

Gospel or Requiem?

Nietzsche and U2 thus offer radically different responses to the blues of the human condition. U2 proclaims the good news of God become human; Nietzsche, having proclaimed God's death, advocates that humans themselves become gods. One achieves salvation, according to Nietzsche, via one's own will to power. What he sees as salvific, however, U2 considers simply another manifestation of human wickedness. Indeed, as they see it, the mark of the kingdom *just is* justice for the oppressed; when Christ reigns, the weak will be liberated—not dominated, not exploited. On U2's view, salvation comes via divine grace, which has conquered the "the great divide" between God and humankind. U2 thus finds redemption in the one who "broke the bonds" and "loosed the chains," taking our shame upon himself. Nietzsche finds it in

[70]Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), § 13, p. 28, emphases in original.

one's ability to make a life beautiful by one's own lights, in the opportunity to achieve whichever of infinitely many possibilities it pleases one to achieve. To be sure, this involves both a reassessment of values and a willingness to exploit others for one's own gain; still, the lives of those "free spirits" who abandon the old morality in order to passionately pursue power will be worth living. In short, then, Nietzsche counsels us to pursue our own interests, which ultimately means accruing power for ourselves; in contrast, U2 counsels us to pursue the interests of others, to lose our lives in order that we might find them.[71]

We are therefore presented with two different responses to the blues of the human condition, two different answers to the question of whether life is worth living. Although each of these answers affirms that life *is* worth living, they conceive of its worth in radically different terms. Like the apostle Paul, U2 sees this present darkness in the light of a life yet to come; given the hope of the coming kingdom, our present suffering *is* worth enduring.[72] But, as we have seen, Nietzsche believes the hope of such a kingdom to be nothing but a self-delusion, "an imaginary *teleology*." So, rather than looking forward to an imaginary afterlife, he counsels us to focus on the present; rather than the kingdom of an imaginary God, we ought to seek first our own kingdom. So we have a choice: on one hand are gospel, humility, self-sacrifice; on the other are requiem, will to power, self-assertion. Like Alice at the crossroads, we can choose either path; which way should we go? Which response to the blues of our own wretchedness ought we favor?

At its most fundamental level, the disagreement between Nietzsche and U2 concerns whether God exists. Given life's blues, Nietzsche takes belief in God to be untenable; and, in a world without God, he sees no room for the "old morality" and its attendant values—hence, the need for a reassessment of values. In a world filled with injustice and pointless suffering,

[71]Cf. Mt 10:39, 16:25.

[72]Cf. Rom 8:18.

moreover, only the ruthless will thrive. U2, however, takes God's existence as a given and seeks to understand life's blues in light of it. So, in choosing which of these ways to go, it seems that we need first to ascertain whether God exists.

Interestingly, neither Nietzsche nor U2 puts forward an argument on the question of God's existence. Nietzsche simply assumes that God does not exist; U2 assumes that he does. This means that we cannot determine which response to favor by examining the *reasons* put forward for the fundamental beliefs underlying them. It does not follow, however, that they provide us no basis for choosing between them. For, perhaps surprisingly, Nietzsche himself provides a criterion for making such a choice. In explaining his rejection of Christianity, Nietzsche writes, "What decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons."[73] In the absence of God, he refuses to privilege reason over taste. After all, human reasoning has developed as it has in the midst of a struggle for survival; consequently, our reason has developed to help us survive, to secure our well-being. And, as Nietzsche points out, there "is no pre-established harmony between the furtherance of truth and the well-being of mankind."[74] Given this, taste seems as effective as reason at helping us choose between competing views. So, if we choose between gospel and requiem, humility and power, abnegation and self-assertion on the grounds suggested by Nietzsche, we will choose on the basis of which we find most beautiful, most pleasing.

Now Nietzsche seems to me not to take seriously the words of the wood-god, Silenus. Recall that, when asked by King Midas what is the best thing for humanity, Silenus answered

[73]Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 132, p. 123.

[74]Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, § 517, p. 182. Elsewhere Nietzsche writes, "What is the origin of logic in man's head? Surely it arose out of the illogical, the realm of which must originally have been immense. But innumerable beings [who] drew inferences in a way different from that in which we do now perish; nonetheless, they might have been closer to the truth!" Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, § 111, p. 112.

that non-existence was best. Since having come into existence it is too late never to have been born, the best option open to us is thus "to die soon." But how can Nietzsche, having accepted the utter desperation of human existence, consistently advise us against Silenus's way out? By his own lights, the truth is *unbearable.* "*Honesty,*" he writes, "would lead to nausea and suicide."[75] In short, the portrait of the world which Nietzsche paints makes life not merely a burden but one *for which there is no point.* By successfully exerting one's will to power, one may for a time dominate one's world, thus temporarily winning the cosmic equivalent of king-of-the-hill. But to what end?

If Nietzsche's assessment were correct, would death not be preferable—even to the divinity to which he invites us? Or, to use a comparison taken from a passage quoted earlier, how do we essentially differ from ants and earwigs? And if they cannot "rise to kinship with God," how is it that we may aspire to divinity? I suggest that, by Nietzsche's own lights, we ought to prefer death to continued existence—even existence as gods. If so, then the choice between U2's response and Nietzsche's turns out to be nothing less than the choice between life and death. That we, like the ancient Israelites, face just such a choice scripture makes clear; and, of course, it urges us to choose life—which, by all accounts, is the more beautiful of the two.

> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. (Deut 30:19-20)

[75]Nietzsche, *Gay Science,* § 107, p. 104, emphasis in original.