

GHOST IN THE MIRROR: DAVID BOWIE, MOURNING, AND SUICIDE

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Sammendrag

David Bowie utviser i sin musikalske karriere en vedvarende fascinasjon for selvmord, både som et tema som dukker opp i sangtekstene hans og som et visuelt motiv fremført i sceneshowene og medieopptredenene hans. Dette essayet fokuserer på hvordan artisten responderte på sin halvbror Terry Burns' selvmord i 1985. Teksten og musikkvideoen til «Jump They Say» (1993) vies spesiell oppmerksomhet, og begge disse fortolkes som uttrykk for en sorgprosess. Essayet gjør bruk av teorier om sorg og traume til å hevde at Bowies respons til Burns' selvmord er kompleks. Det demonstreres at Bowie prøvde å rasjonalisere sin egen reaksjon, via psykoanalyse, som en ordnet gjennomarbeidelse med egoets frigjøring som resultat. Ved hjelp av Derrida argumenteres det her at prosessen faktisk er langvarig og uten noen enkel avslutning. Analysen forbinder Bowies sorgprosess med viktige, tidlige sanger som «Rock'n Roll Suicide», «All the Madmen» og «The Bewlay Brothers», og viser også hvordan «I Can't Read» og «Goodbye Mr. Ed» kan tolkes som forgjengere for «Jump They Say». Det argumenteres for at Bowies sorgprosess senere blir mer dunkel, men vedvarer til slutten av hans karriere, blant annet i form av avslutningen til musicalen Lazarus (2016).

Nøkkelord

David Bowie, selvmord, død, sorg, sangtekster.

Abstract

The musical career of David Bowie displays a longstanding fascination with suicide, as both a theme that recurs in his lyrics and as a visually enacted motif in his stage and media performances. This essay focuses on how the artist responded to the death of his half-brother Terry Burns by suicide in 1985. Close attention is given to the lyrics of, and music video for, “Jump They Say” (1993), both of which are interpreted as acts of mourning. The essay engages with theories of mourning and trauma to suggest that Bowie's response to Burns's suicide is a complex one. Bowie is shown to try to rationalise his reaction, via psychoanalysis, as an ordered working through that leads to the freeing of the ego. With the help of Derrida, it is here argued that the process is, in fact, a protracted and open-ended one. The analysis connects Bowie's mourning with important earlier songs such as “Rock'n Roll Suicide”, “All the Madmen” and “The Bewlay Brothers”, and also demonstrates how “I Can't Read” and “Goodbye Mr. Ed” can be interpreted as predecessors for “Jump They Say”. It is argued that Bowie's mourning process later becomes more occluded, but persists to the very end of his career, including the ending of his musical Lazarus (2016).

Keywords

David Bowie, suicide, death, mourning, lyrics.

*Shadows growing closer now
The Cure, “I Can Never Say Goodbye”*

Introduction

How to bear the tragic loss of a brother? In *Antigone*, Sophocles provides a famous interpretation on the compelling exigency of mourning a sibling. The title character of the tragedy insists upon burying her brother, Polynices, even if he has died in battle as a traitor to the polis of Ithaca, and she will therefore incur a heavy penalty for doing so. A brother, Antigone claims, is essentially irreplaceable: “never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there, would I have taken on myself this task in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I could have had another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and my father in Hades below, I could never have another brother” (Sophocles 1994, 87). A brother’s death is a singular event, she implies, because of his irreplaceability. This idea has caused bemusement among many readers of Sophocles, provoking Goethe to speculate whether the lines in question are a spurious addition not stemming from Sophocles himself (see Lacan 1992, 255). It also contradicts an influential interpretation of mourning, which claims that no one is irreplaceable. In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud claims that the “normal” outcome of a mourning process is “withdrawal of the libido” from one object of love “and transference of it to a new one” (Freud 1963, 170). Once one has got over the loss of someone, “the ego becomes free and uninhibited again” (166), and is thus able to reinvest in a new relationship. Against the Freudian model, Jacques Derrida has suggested that mourning actually involves a process whereby the other is never fully interiorized, and the process never actually achieves any determinate resolution. This is “the sublimity of a mourning without sublimation and without the obsessive triumph of which Freud speaks” (Derrida 1989, 38). As a result, there is no simple replacement or moving on.

In this essay, these contrasting ideas of mourning will inform a close reading of how David Bowie’s lyrics deal with his relationship to his half-brother, Terry Burns (1937-1985). Central to my argument will be the song “Jump They Say” (1993), which Bowie explicitly linked with Burns’ death by suicide. I will show how the song provides a junction for several of the diverse thematic and motivic strands connected with suicide in Bowie’s oeuvre. Both the song and its iconographically rich music video (directed by Mark Romanek) will be interpreted not only in terms of an act of meditation on the half-brother’s sad death, but also in terms of Bowie’s interpretation of his own career. I will show how these works suggest that Bowie’s artistic mourning of Terry Burns is a complex, protracted process.

In doing so, I will necessarily be embarking upon some biographical speculation, and, as Simon Critchley reminds us, we should be wary of reading Bowie’s lyrics “autobiographically, as clues and signals that would lead us to some authentic sense of the ‘real’ Bowie” (Critchley 2016, 45). Bearing in mind the complexity of Bowie’s work, I will be noting some of the swerves and impasses involved in interpreting his lyrics and performances, which often are markedly open-ended. At the same time, Bowie himself has engaged in quite a lot of interpretation himself, and an inclusive understanding of his oeuvre will surely engage also with the rich paratextual resources that challenge any understanding of his texts as autonomous works of art. The analyses will also make use of psychoanalytical frameworks when it is useful but, as we shall see, Bowie’s acts of mourning are generally more in line with Derrida and Sophocles than the Freudian model. My argument will also pull in both earlier and later songs than “Jump They Say”, arguing for a more extensive presence of Burns in Bowie’s oeuvre than he has usually been allocated. The suicide of Terry Burns will be shown, effectively, not just to lead to mourning but also something that can be conceptualised as a traumatic reaction.

Early songs on suicide and madness

The last concert of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust Tour, which took place at the Hammersmith Odeon in London on 3 July 1973, was a much-publicized affair. Famously, towards the end of the concert, Bowie declared that: "not only is it the last show of the tour, but it's the last show that we'll ever do". This announcement was made just before launching into the concert's final number, "Rock'n Roll Suicide." This song is a kind of meta-meditation on the perils of popular music fame, as Bowie's lyrics admonish a despairing rock star to desist from killing him- or herself: "No matter what or who you've been [...] / I've had my share, now I'll help you with the pain / You're not alone." Interpreted in the context of the Hammersmith Odeon concert, the song acquired a highly reflexive value: while we in retrospect know that Bowie was simply calling time on his Ziggy persona and the settled line-up of his backing band, the Spiders from Mars, that would not have been obvious to the audience at the time. Introducing the song with Bowie's mentioned declaration – which was a departure from the normal routine of this tour (see Trynka 2011, 192-3) – suggests that the end of Ziggy can, in one way or another, be construed as a form of artistic suicide. It also suggests that suicide is a rather rich trope, which can be interpreted in many different ways. This is reflected in the confused and quite diverse response to the concert, as fans and pundits struggled to make sense of what had happened. As Nicholas Pegg has pointed out, while Bowie at one level simply had "successfully fulfilled the self-immolation of Ziggy Stardust's apocalyptic narrative", some believed he had quit the music business altogether, while others thought he had pulled the plug on touring (Pegg 2016, 552). While this in part can be written off as ignorant speculation, it also reveals something essential about Bowie's lyrics and performances, that is also true of how they approach the motif of suicide: there is a lot of leeway for interpretation, opening for a variety of understandings.

Another way of saying this is to state that Bowie seldom provides a transparent message, and this aspect is linked with the complex, and highly self-conscious way he negotiates identity. It is customary to think of Bowie, particularly in the 1970s, as a master of self-reinvention. As he embraced and subsequently shed personae such as Major Tom, Ziggy, and the Thin White Duke, he showed an incomparable ability to switch artistic identity and direction. Although the personas were perhaps not so clearly articulated later in his career, he was to continue a restless movement from genre to genre, shifting, for instance, in the 1990s from the basic rock of *Tin Machine* (1988-92), via the jazz-inflected *Black Tie, White Noise* (1993) and densely produced, industrial rock of *Outside* (1995), to the drum and bass of *Earthling* (1997) and more acoustically informed *hours...* (1999). As Bowie himself articulated in one of his most iconic songs (also used as the title of collections of his work), he was an artist of "Changes."

An early trace of the theme of suicide can be found in Bowie's plan, already in 1968, to make a rock opera, *Ernie Johnson*, where the titular character was to commit suicide (O'Leary 2018, 628; see also Trynka 2011, 151). In early lyrics such as "Rock'n Roll Suicide", "Changes", "All the Young Dudes", "Five Years", and "Candidate", suicide is in part linked with dystopian fantasies of societies where the only option to oppression is opting out, and in part to a youthful exuberance that either does not want to, or cannot, imagine growing old. In the documentary *Cracked Actor*, filmed in 1974, Bowie referred to his own "strange, psychosomatic death wish" (Hagler 2023, 44), and with the mesmeric, dark lyrics of "Always Crashing the Same Car" (from the *Low* album) the motif becomes more personal.

Bowie later returns, in passing, to suicide in the angry, far-ranging lyric “It’s No Game”, on the *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* album (1980): “Put a bullet in my brain / And it makes all the papers.” Effectively, though, the theme of suicide is approached by Bowie from a different vantage point after this. With the passing of his youth – accompanied by his documented, gradual retreat from substance abuse, as well as anxiety after the assassination of his friend, John Lennon – death becomes something less of a personal temptation and more of an external threat. The later treatment of suicide also has roots in Bowie’s writing of the 1970s, though. The speaker of the song “All the Madmen”, which appeared in the 1970 album *The Man Who Sold the World*, is an institutionalised individual struggling with mental problems. Basing the song on how Terry Burns was institutionalised in the London mental hospital Cane Hill for paranoid schizophrenia, Bowie depicts a character who is medicated and obviously struggling in some respects (stating that “I’m not quite right at all”), but who also embraces his own condition. Fundamentally, he suggests, there is more sanity in his inmates than in people on the outside of the institution. The lyrics lament that “a nation hides / Its organic minds in a cellar, dark and grim.” Although there is no overt mention of a death-wish, the speaker does rhetorically evoke the possibility of self-inflicted violence in an attempt to ensure that he is not set free: “I tell them that / I can fly, I will scream, I will break my arm / I will do me harm.” One might note that another early song reputedly about Bowie’s relationship to Terry, “The Bewlay Brothers,” also sounds a similarly ominous note in passing: “Now my Brother lays upon the Rocks / He could be dead, He could be not.”

“All the Madmen” is a significant song in Bowie’s catalogue: even if it is not one of his classic, heavily-anthologised songs, it seems to have had a talismanic importance for much of his career. Just by tracing its history, one gains a sense of how Terry Burns was to accompany Bowie through much of his career. Seventeen years after its conception, he revived it for the 1987 *Glass Spider* tour and it appears on the 1987 live album from that tour, recorded in Montreal. The latter performance includes the enigmatic chant introduced at the end of the song, where Bowie repetitively intones “Zane, Zane, Zane / Ouvre le Chien”. This hints both at insanity and opening the door to an unusual, perhaps even non-human, state of being, and may, as Chris O’Leary has speculated, allude to a passage in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where Zarathustra admonishes a young man that “thy wild dogs want liberty, they bark for joy in their cellar when thy spirit endeavoureth to open all prison doors” (quoted in O’Leary 2015, 149; but see also Stark 2017, 104). That same chant resurfaces in 1993 at the end of the title track of *Buddha of Suburbia* (which evokes the South London landscape in which Bowie and Burns grew up), and was also used on the stage set of the *Outside* tour of 1995-1996 (a live album covering a Dallas concert from the tour is titled *Ouvrez Le Chien*). The *Outside* album was partially fuelled by Bowie and Brian Eno’s fascination with the outsider art of institutionalised patients in a Vienna hospital, and one of the storylines Bowie linked with the album was that of a murder committed by a minotaur figure.

The death of Terry Burns and “Jump They Say”

By the time of *Outside*, Terry Burns had passed away. He committed suicide by lying down on the railway tracks at the Coulsdon South station, before being run over by a train, on 16 January 1985. Three years earlier, he had tried to end his life, “throwing himself out of his bedroom window at Cane Hill and fracturing his arm and leg” (Buckley 2005, 369). Ten years older than Bowie, Burns had been an idol for his younger brother, particularly exposing him to American

literature (including the Beats) and music. But Burns had had a troubled life, spending much of his time in institutional care. An early harbinger was a visit to a Cream concert in February 1967, which triggered a hallucinating fit in the older brother. For Bowie, the trauma of Burns' death was exacerbated by the fact that a maternal aunt accused him of neglecting Burns, both in the tabloids and in a subsequent biography (Gillman and Gillman, 1987). Bowie did not attend the funeral, citing a wish not to have the occasion marred by the presence of reporters, but sent a bouquet that included words echoing the film *Blade Runner*: "You've seen more things than we can imagine, but all these moments will be lost – like tears washed away by the rain" (Trynka 2011, 329). In the context of the funeral, the quotation has an odd, self-reflective quality, as not only will Burns's "moments" be "lost", but also Bowie's "tears" will disappear without any public exhibition. Read in this manner, the bouquet comes across as something of a self-negating gesture, something which, as we will see, can also be said – albeit in a different manner – about Bowie's later, more public acts of mourning.

Is an overt, clear act of commemoration ideal, or should one obey a form of funerary discretion? Jacques Derrida has claimed that all mourning involves a double bind. In his own commemoration of Roland Barthes in "The Deaths of Roland Barthes", Derrida identifies "a certain mimeticism [which] is at once a duty (to take him into oneself, to identify with him in order to let him speak within oneself, to make him present and faithfully represent him) and the worst of temptations, the most indecent and most murderous." The mourner is torn between the "gift *and* the revocation of the gift, just try to choose" (Derrida 2001, 38). As we shall see something of this doubleness, and indeed an unwillingness to clearly choose one option over the other, characterizes Bowie's most explicit artistic response to Burns' death. Eight years after that death, "Jump They Say" was the first single culled from his album *Black Tie, White Noise* – an album which also included a cover of Cream's "I Feel Free" in a tacit homage to Bowie's brother (as well as a nostalgic return, in the company of Mick Ronson, to a song that featured in concerts of the Ziggy Stardust era).

"Jump They Say" is, effectively, Bowie's elegy of sorts for Terry Burns. The lyrics are complex and have been described as a "paranoid jumble" (Erlewine). The speaker of the song refers to a "shaking man", who is typically interpreted as a representation of Burns. In addition, the speaker addresses a "friend", who may be identical to the "shaking man" but more likely is a third party (and stand-in for the song's listeners) who is being admonished to help save the "shaking man". These three personae are set off against an antagonistic "crowd", whose demeaning and debilitating comments and injunctions make up much of the song. The repeated, mantra-like quotation of the crowd's views creates an oppressive atmosphere, simulating a kind of brainwashing information overload that echoes Bowie's dystopian interpretations of *1984* and *A Clockwork Orange* in the 1970s. The friend is without mouth, eyes, or brain, the crowd claims, and it eggs him on to make a fatal leap from which the speaker, in the chorus, tries to dissuade him: "I say he should watch his ass / My friend don't listen to the crowd / They say jump / They say jump / Watch out!"

Another song on the *Black Tie, White Noise* album, "Pallas Athena", has a repeated refrain that somewhat ambiguously (and perhaps parodically) suggests that "God is on the top of it all – that's all!" Religion also enters into the setting of "Jump They Say", as the opening lines tell us that the troubled, shaking man is climbing a church: he is "Streaking cathedral spire." This may be an allusion to "The Bewlay Brothers", which had an enigmatic reference to "the grim face on the Cathedral floor" before later presenting the previously mentioned vision of Burns dead among the rocks. In any case, the voice of the crowd in "Jump They Say" also remarks that the shaking man is "born again" and "has two gods": this suggests that he is suffering from

some form of religious indoctrination or psychosis. According to Peter and Leni Gilman, Burns's first schizophrenic attack, in 1967, involved a vision of Christ asking him to "go out into the world and do some work for me" (Gilman and Gilman 1986, 140). The way in which the ending of the song repeatedly returns to that one has "Got to believe somebody" connects with this motif, linking up not only with Burns' personal history but also Bowie's frequently expressed disdain for organised forms of religion (see for instance Hagler 2023, 214). It also underlines that the man climbing the cathedral is in a vulnerable state of solitude: perhaps he has to "believe somebody" in order to help him out of his crisis, but in the dramatic setting of the song it is vital that he listens to those who care for him rather than the anonymous crowd.

It is striking that the speaker and his interlocutor take a sympathetic role roughly equivalent to the speaker of "Rock'n Roll Suicide": although the two songs have a very different sound, the lyrics appear to be built around similar situations. In this context, it is significant that Bowie chose to include a subterranean allusion to the older song elsewhere on the same album: Bowie had interpreted Morrissey's "I know It's Gonna Happen Someday" to be "a lovely parody" of "Rock'n Roll Suicide" (quoted in Hagler 2023, 220), and cheekily reappropriated his own song, as it were, by including a cover of "I Know It's Gonna Happen Someday" on *Black Tie, White Noise*. Pleading "Please, don't lose faith" in rather grandiloquent fashion, Bowie's version of Morrissey's song articulates, perhaps, the support and advice Bowie would have given his half-brother in an ideal world. But "Jump They Say" offers a darker vision: in the album version, there is a sense of drama at the close, as the repeated chant of "They say jump" is accompanied by Bowie's saxophone reaching higher and higher notes. It is as if the call is rolling round and round in the shaking man's brain, as he has yet to choose who to believe in this moment of crisis. Here Bowie can be seen as tapping into the "strange, attractive energy" that Critchley observes suicide can "provoke in audiences", making it into an exciting spectacle (Critchley 2020, 14).

The song presents, then, a dramatized scene where Bowie and the audience are placed in a situation where they might – but also might not – be able to save a character similar to, and largely based upon, Terry Burns. It imposes a kind of ethical responsibility that casts interesting light on a notorious interview Bowie made with Vera Kvaal for Norwegian TV in 1990. Although laughing and self-ironic, Bowie is often testy in the interview, and he reacts strongly when Kvaal suggests that he has any kind of responsibility as a music "idol", since every individual (he claims) acts according to their own free will (Bowie 2019, 88). Yet in interviews after the release of the single, Bowie would admit he "felt probably very guilty that I hadn't made any contact" with Terry in the time leading up to the latter's suicide (quoted in Hagler 2023, 216). He also retrospectively downplayed Terry's importance for himself: "I think I unconsciously exaggerated his importance. I invented this hero-worship to discharge my guilt and failure, and to set myself free from my own hang-ups" (quoted in O'Leary 2018, 350). Given the context and the use of the term "discharge", this can be interpreted as a rationalising embrace of psychoanalysis's previously mentioned, and somewhat reductionistic, belief that mourning is a process that can be successfully terminated. Yet one might also note the slightly indecisive note evident in the words "I think": Bowie would appear to be wary of too confidently tracing the developmental arc of his own unconscious thought processes. Although he had knowledge of Jung's theories, for instance being attracted to the latter's description of the "repressed, unconscious aspects of the psyche" as a "shadow" (Stark 2018, 92), Bowie also shied away from overly formulaic or rationalising accounts of what was going on in the recesses of his mind.

The tenuous nature of this self-conscious navigation of guilt and mourning finds a kind of objective correlative in the video for “Jump They Say”. Directed, as previously mentioned, by Mark Romanek – who already had directed music videos by artists such as Teenage Fanclub, K. D. Lang, and Madonna – the video transports the setting to an urban skyscraper. Another subtle displacement is the reframing of the chanting of the crowd, giving the hallucinated inner voice a more concrete manifestation in empty-gazed officials who manhandle the troubled, would-be suicide. As Nicholas Pegg observes, the video “is an exercise in cinematic reference”, echoing not only Chris Marker’s *La Jetée* (1962) but also “Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, Kubrick’s *2001*, Orson Welles’s *The Trial*, the paranoid identity-theft thrillers of John Frankenheimer, and Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*” (Pegg 2016, 145). One result of this iconography is that the song acquires a more explicitly dystopian dimension, resonating with Bowie’s consistent tendency to envisage totalitarian societies that subject their citizens to brain-washing and/or overwhelming physical duress.

In the video of “Jump They Say”, the person who is subjected to this systemic violence is acted by Bowie himself. If the lyrics of the song show evidence of his being dogged by the ghost or shadow of Terry Burns, the video at least partially declares, like Bowie’s early 1970s song “The Shadow Man,” that “the shadow man is you.” Significantly, the video again provoked the ire of Bowie’s previously mentioned aunt, who told a tabloid: “The picture of David with his face scarred so much upset me terribly. There is a real resemblance. David looks just like Terry did when he became schizophrenic” (quoted in Pegg 2016, 145). This is of course a bilateral dynamic: while the resemblance might (for the few viewers acquainted with Terry) make the individual in the video more like the deceased, there is also an opposite movement by which Terry’s predicament is becoming appropriated by Bowie’s artistic persona. It has also been noted that Bowie’s injured appearance in the parts of the video self-reflectively echoes the cover of his earlier album, *Lodger* (1979).

There is both fidelity and erasure, according to the double movement we’ve previously seen traced by Derrida. This duality is reflected in an interview in NME on 27 March 1993, where Bowie is credited as claiming that “‘Jump They Say’ is semi-based on my impression of my step-brother and probably, for the first time, trying to write about how I felt about him committing suicide. It’s also connected to my feeling that sometimes I’ve jumped metaphysically into the unknown and wondering whether I really believed there was something out there to support me, whatever you wanna call it; a God or a life-force?” (Bowie 2015, 225). Here there is a twofold movement of commemoration and self-mythologisation. Bowie has often integrated reflections about his own career in his songs – as for instance in “Ashes to Ashes” and “Teenage Wildlife” from the *Scary Monsters* album – and seen from this perspective the totalitarian man handlers of the video might be read as representing the strictures of a demanding public and record industry. At the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, it was crucial for Bowie to break out of expectations of mega stardom and commercial success created by the success of the *Let’s Dance* album, and the video of “Jump They Say” can be read, at one level, as an ironic reflection on the kind of artistic suicide that Bowie, at this stage, wanted to resist.

One of the most striking images of the video, later recirculated to great effect in Brett Morgen’s *Moonage Daydream* film (2022) (as well as in a DVD ROM titled “Jump”), is of Bowie not climbing a cathedral spire, but rather going into a lift. In some iterations the doors of the lift close, obscuring our access to Bowie. In other images, we are left in an empty corridor, as the lift presumably has gone up to the top of the skyscrapers. In a video full of people filming and being projected onto screens, such images can be taken as reminders of the controlled nature of the spectacle we are observing. Although the distance between Bowie’s artistic personae and

his own life has varied throughout his career, this can be taken as signalling that we are not being given a transparent view into his biography. Another anti-realistic detail is evident in the closing sequence of the video, where Bowie's body is lying in a car on the ground level. This is a reconstruction of the picture of Evelyn McHale lying on a Cadillac, featuring in *Life Magazine* on 12 May 1947: McHale had committed suicide by jumping from the Empire State Building but looked uncannily peaceful in the image. The video reconstructs this image, but also has Bowie opening his eyes, and singing, for good measure. As a result, it is underlined that Bowie the artist transcends the suicidal character he is playing.

Implicitly, this suggests Bowie is intimating that he survives, and indeed finds new vitality, in the potentially destructive artistic leaps "into the unknown" so often occurring throughout his career. More personally, we might also infer that Bowie is transcending his own grief, through a process of distancing and "discharge" of affect that ultimately will leave Terry Burns and the circumstances of his death behind. This is line with the Freudian theory of mourning and indeed also theories of elegy. Yet it is notable that the transcendence here does not lead to "the act of substitution, without which no work of mourning is complete, the reattachment to a new object of love" (Sacks 1985, 114). Rather than substitution, the video suggests, there is a replacement of the relationship of the deceased with a form of narcissistic self-relation. As we shall see later in this essay, though, such an outcome does bring with it the danger that the ghost is merely more obscurely, and more safely, lodged deep in the self.

The interim: Mourning and trauma, 1985-1993

Perhaps Bowie could leave his brother behind in 1993 because so much time had passed since his death? The eight years separating Burns' suicide from "Jump They Say" constitutes a vast gap. It is surprising there is no "Goodbye, Terry" in the interim, especially given the horrendous circumstances of Burns' death. Bowie's own description of the death as something "which, for me, was absolutely incomprehensible" (quoted in Hagler 2023, 216) would suggest that he experienced it as a traumatic event. Indeed, perhaps trauma theory can give us a lead here: An influential understanding of trauma stresses that it comes out of an "event" that is "not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth 1996, 4). One reason for the time gap may be that Bowie was busy with the group project of Tin Machine for much of this period, a working environment not too conducive to explorations of personal grief. On the other hand, though, precisely this environment produced "Goodbye Mr. Ed," perhaps the best song of *Tin Machine II* (1992), and one which is not unrelated to "Jump They Say".

The title and refrain of "Goodbye Mr. Ed" make a nod back to a more innocent age: Mr. Ed was the titular speaking horse featuring in a six-season TV series from 1961 to 1966. As Chris O'Leary has pointed out, the Tin Machine song starts with evoking the Indian tribe of the Lenape (called "Manhattoes" by their successors), who were fooled into selling "Manhattan to the Dutch for sixty guilders' of trade goods" (O'Leary 2018, 319). The opening lines oddly anticipate Bowie's later elegy to his half-brother: "The ghost of Manhattoes / Shrieking as they fall from AT&T." The Indians are "shrieking" where the friend of "Jump They Said" will be "streaking", and the former fall from the AT&T building in New York (designed by Philip Johnson, who is evoked in Bowie's song "Thru' These Architects Eyes") resonates alongside the friend's location on a cathedral and then, in the video, within and on top of a corporate skyscraper. A quick reference to Breugel and Icarus opens up another register: "Icarus takes his

pratfall / Breugel on his head.” This is an allusion to Pieter Breugel the elder’s “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”, which is exhibited in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Brussels.

The most famous poetic treatment of the image is W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts”, which contrasts tragic loss with the obliviousness of everyday life. Both the image and the last stanza of Auden’s poem were prominently displayed early on in Nicolas Roeg’s 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, where Bowie played the main role of the alien, Thomas Jerome Newton. According to Auden’s opening to the poem, grand masters such as Breugel understand how suffering “takes place / While someone is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (Auden 2000, 29). In Auden’s poem, the fall of Icarus is thus ignored, just as is the “miraculous birth” of Christ: when “Something amazing” of this magnitude occurs, it fails to register in people’s consciousness (29).

This can help make sense of the rather cryptic refrain of “Goodbye Mr. Ed”: “Some things are so big / They make no sense / History’s so small / People are so dense / Someone sees it all / Goodbye Mr. Ed”. Some tragedies are so great that the common perspective of history cannot fathom them. Here there is an echo of Bowie’s previously cited words on Terry Burns’ graveyard bouquet, which lamented that the wondrous things that he had seen would be lost for ever. The vision of “Someone sees it all” also arguably resonates with the room Auden’s poem implicitly makes for a divine perspective. Is Bowie calling for such an all-seeing god, or he is himself taking the position of witness in the default of divinity? The lyrics can be read as being ambivalent in this regard. In any case, “Goodbye Mr. Ed” establishes a connection between Terry Burns (who, as previously mentioned, jumped out a window in a failed suicide attempt, and was represented as falling to earth in the “Jump They Say” video) and the title of character of *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which we will return to later.

Another neglected gem from Bowie’s Tin Machine period, “I Can’t Read,” can be interpreted as presenting a Bowie struggling with a mixture of grief and trauma. The speaker of the lyrics is in a depressed stupor, unable to do anything more meaningful than endlessly watch cop shows on television. As in many of his songs dealing with suicide, Bowie’s lyrics home in on a car in a moment of extreme dejection: “I just cough, catch the chase / Switch the channel, watch the police car”. The title reflects the speaker’s inability to do anything intellectually demanding: “I can’t read and I can’t write down / I don’t know a book from *Countdown*.” This odd reference to books and reading might be linked with how, in interviews, Bowie has repeatedly referred to how Terry’s wide reading was an inspiration for himself (quoted in Hagler 2023, 217, 400). The speaker’s inability to “get it right” might be interpreted generally, as an implicit commentary on Bowie’s creative struggles of the time, but no direct explanation is given for his predicament. The lines “I don’t care which shadow gets me / All I’ve got is someone’s face” hint at a more fundamental, ghostly predicament.

Originally appearing on the first Tin Machine album, four years after Terry’s death, Bowie would persist with this song. A new recording was originally meant to be included on his solo album *Earthling* (1997) but instead appeared in the film *The Ice Storm* (also in 1997), directed by Ang Lee. In the latter version, the lines about shadows and “someone’s face” are followed by the question: “Can I see the family smile? / Can I reach tomorrow?” The low-key, accompanying video has a masked Bowie staring at a mirror, while his bass player Gail Ann Dorsey uses a video camera reminiscent of the many cameras utilised in the “Jump They Say” video. Whether or not one interprets the references to family and a shadow as allusions to the haunting of his half-brother, and the searching of his image in the mirror as indicative of the “real resemblance” to Terry’s face (as noted by Bowie’s aunt), “I Can’t Read” does fill something of the

emotional void that separates the sad events of the 1985 suicide from the densely layered, but ultimately elusive, spectacle of “Jump They Say.”

Later developments

In later work, it becomes harder to trace the presence of Terry Burns in Bowie’s output. There is an interesting progression from the mentioned image of Bowie anxiously searching his mirror image in the 1997 video for “I Can’t Read”, to the 1999 video for “Thursday’s Child”, where his mirror image becomes a projection of his youthful self. The latter echoes the cover art for the *hours...* album (on which “Thursday’s Child” appears) and seems to suggest that Bowie is trying to assimilate troubling others (such as Terry Burns) into a more narcissistic projection of a simple alter ego. In the words of Derrida, the other is “finish[ed] off” by taking him “inside ourselves” (Derrida 2001, 50).

Yet this tendency is not absolute in Bowie’s later work. The valedictory “Dollar Days”, from his final album *Blackstar* (2016), evokes the memories and imaginative landscape conjured by the England of his past. As Leah Kardos has pointed out, it also echoes the chords of “the climactic ‘You’re not alone!’ moment of ‘Rock ‘n’ Roll Suicide” (Kardos 2022, 182). Is the falling figure of “Jump They Say” also evoked by lines such as “I’m falling down / Don’t believe for just one second I’m forgetting you / I’m trying to”? Does the dolour of the song bear the imprint, still, of the grief over the suicide of Bowie’s brother back in 1985? It’s hard to say. To be sure, the rather open-ended “you” both remembered and (half) forgotten here might include Terry, but it would be hard to rule out any number of friends and family members (including Bowie’s father, allegedly recalled in the elliptical “Everyone Says ‘Hi’”, from the *Heathen* album). In a 2008 interview with *The Daily Mail*, Bowie addressed “The Bewlay Brothers”, one of the earliest songs that he has acknowledged as dealing in some ways with his half-brother, as follows: “I wouldn’t know how to interpret the lyric of this song other than suggesting that there are layers of ghosts within it. It’s a palimpsest, then” (Bowie 2008). Such a palimpsestic structure appears to be at work in many of Bowie’s later texts, where it is very difficult to pin down concrete references or individuals being addressed, but one might conjecture that there are a range of echoes and allusions at work simultaneously.

It is also safe to say that the theme of suicide is less often, and less starkly, evoked in the final string of Bowie albums. Death is an obsessive presence, but it tends to appear mediated either by murderous figures (such as in “Valentine’s Day” or “Sue (A Season of Crime)”) or through the interweaving of mortality and old age. A fascinating twist is provided by “You Feel So Lonely You Could Die” from *The Next Day* (2013), where Bowie’s speaker is full of venom towards an unidentified individual, even egging on this object of hatred to end his life. Another notable late meditation on suicide is found in the preceding *Reality* (2003) album, in the form of “She’ll Drive the Big Car”, which revisits some of the same thematic territory as “Always Crashing in the Same Car” but displaces it into a more ethically fraught situation involving a mother, her husband, and their daughter.

The public was struck by the self-conscious treatment of death in Bowie’s final album *Blackstar*, but interviews with associates have revealed that the whole album was actually recorded before Bowie was aware of that he would not survive the cancer with which he was struggling: “From speaking with collaborators from the period, it seemed clear that Bowie was fighting to live and wished to carry on working. He was experiencing creative momentum that was tragically cut short by his circumstances” (Kardos 2022, 204). This is not to deny that *Blackstar*

represents an immaculate piece of self-dramatisation, as well as an outstanding musical highpoint of Bowie's late work.

Yet while the album anticipates his death in several lyrics, in many ways this is merely the continuation a theme that he had been circling around for a long time. *Heathen*, for instance, has four death songs that were inspired by Strauss's valedictory "Four Last Songs." Furthermore, in late albums such as *hours...* (1999), the theme of suicide subtly surfaces in a way that can be hard to distinguish from that of a more generalised sense of dejection, which is of a staple throughout Bowie's career. One might think back to earlier incarnations such as the Major Tom figure of "Space Oddity" and "Ashes to Ashes", as well as the Thomas Jerome Newton character Bowie played, as previously mentioned, in the 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and resuscitated for his late musical, *Lazarus* (2016). With these characters outer space becomes associated with a form of extreme dissociation, which can be interpreted as bringing with it an implicit pull towards suicide.

Lazarus entailed a realisation of Bowie's long-cherished dream of creating a rock opera, and ends with an ambivalent scene where Newton and a young, imaginary female character try to return, rather riskily, to his home planet with the help of a spaceship. The implicit folly of this venture casts the spaceship as something of a double of the cars that tend to accompany several of Bowie's suicidal lyrics. Intriguingly, the song chosen for this moment of the musical is "'Heroes'", a song with rich resonance in his career, including a reference to the Berlin wall as well as being featured in a memorable performance at Live Aid. Despite Bowie's own doubts (see Kardos 2022, 125), the effect is quite remarkable, as a song usually taken as an anthem of everyday individualism becomes heavily marked with a kind of melancholy foolhardiness. The more sceptical notes in the song come out all the stronger, as Newton and his companion are aware of that theirs is a passing transcendence and that "We're nothing, and nothing will help us". Newton's references to his "breaking mind" and "my madness" in the script might also suggest Bowie is making a final allusion to Burns' suicide (Bowie and Walsh 2016, 61). We have previously seen a subtle link being established between Newton and Burns in the lyrics of "Goodbye, Mr. Ed", and here it appears that the overdetermined swansong of Bowie's musical is tacitly connecting what is perhaps his most popular song, as well as his most iconic film role, with the death of his half-brother.

If this embrace of death is a kind of sharing of Burns' leap into the unknown, then, at the same time, it is far from the first time Bowie closely confronts his half-brother in his work. One of the ways Bowie bore both the troubled life and the tragic death of Terry Burns was to integrate him into his music and performances. Bowie's lyrics can indeed be seen as therapeutic exercises, trying to make sense of and work through a sense of loss and bewilderment. But there does not appear to have been any triumph or final liberation, as this loss was irreplaceable. Just like Antigone, Bowie could never have another brother. Terry Burns was not a shadow that could be easily banished, but rather a ghost that flocked the mirror of the ageing singer-songwriter. If we cannot banish the idea of Bowie as a kind of phoenix-like figure who persistently transcended and survived the masks and personas he utilised during his creative journey, we will do well to add that with every new mask, new accretions were added to the palimpsest of his artistic identity. Certainly, when he looked at his own image in the mirror, he himself was struck by the thickening shades.

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