



University  
of Glasgow

Adam, A.K.M. (2011) '*What these cryptic symbols mean*': quotation, allusion, and John Darnielle's biblical interpretation. Biblical Interpretation, 19 (2). pp. 109-128. ISSN 0927-2569

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/45247/>

Deposited on: 9 January 2012

‘What These Cryptic Symbols Mean’:  
Quotation, Allusion, and John Darnielle’s Biblical Interpretation

A. K. M. Adam  
University of Glasgow

The Mountain Goats' 2004 album *We Shall All Be Healed* includes the song “Palmcorder Yajna,” recorded in an jangly overamplified style that suggests urgency and edginess. The first verse sets the stage for a series of fever-dream of drug-soaked anxieties in a cheap hotel with friends, methamphetamine, and ominous clues:

Holt Boulevard  
Between Gary and White  
Hooked up with some friends at the Travelodge  
Set ourselves up for the night  
Carpenter ants in the dresser  
Flies in the screen  
It will be too late by the time we learn  
What these cryptic symbols mean.<sup>1</sup>

The question of meaning and ambiguity recurs throughout the Mountain Goats' extensive discography, particularly in conjunction with their frequent allusions to biblical texts. Their work — John Darnielle's work<sup>2</sup> — displays a salutary resistance to oversimplifying binaries. On one hand, their records defy the imperative to fit into the “Christian rock”-vs.-mainstream “secular rock” market niches; on the other, they do not fit conveniently into the biblical-critical world's fascination with characterise certain interpretive methods as “legitimate” and others as “illegitimate.” The Mountain Goats' songs don't challenge these binaries head-on, but they demonstrate the allusive richness available to an interpreter freed from obsessive obeisance to these idols of the market and the library.

Whereas in many popular interpretations, the Bible figures as an oracular repository of sacred law, or as a textbook of science and metaphysics, or a sourcebook for general spirituality, the Mountain Goats' biblical songs draw on the Bible as an all-too-human expression of how the world is (and will be), even when the appearances suggest otherwise. In so doing, the Mountain Goats make the moral and theological ambivalence of the Bible

---

<sup>1</sup> “Palmcorder Yajna,” *We Shall All Be Healed*, (4AD 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The Mountain Goats have included numerous members over the years, but always as supporting musicians for John Darnielle, who writes almost all the lyrics and music, sings lead vocals, and usually plays guitar or keyboard tracks. For instance, Darnielle also performs as “The Mountain Goats” on solo tours. Hence, this essay will refer to Darnielle and the Mountain Goats without making rigorous distinctions between the two, even though on *The Life of the World to Come*, the album central to this essay Darnielle is accompanied by Jon Wurster on drums and Peter Hughes on bass.

audible again without resolving that ambivalence into consoling or deplorable platitudes.

Mountain Goats frontman John Darnielle<sup>3</sup> writes the band's material, most often as musical speech-in-character. Sometimes the songs' protagonists reflect Darnielle's own experiences (most candidly on *We Shall All Be Healed* and *The Sunset Tree*<sup>4</sup>). Most often, Darnielle writes vignettes of imagined others' lives (though his predilection for speech-in-character composition avails not only to direct attention to others' lives, but also to introduce elements of his own experience represented as another's).<sup>5</sup> He draws characters who resemble familiar figures closely enough to be recognisable, but who step out of stereotype to display traits that deepen, perhaps even belie, the conventions of their type. His sustained sequence of songs on the "Alpha Couple" (so called because most of the songs that involve them have titles that begin with "Alpha") depicts a pair of married partners whose relationship has so soured that neither can tolerate the other any longer. Nonetheless, they remain bound to one another in a love from which every faint trace of affection has been eradicated. "No Children" crystallises the couple's indissolubly caustic relationship:

I hope it stays dark forever  
I hope the worst isn't over  
And I hope you blink before I do  
Yeah I hope I never get sober  
And I hope when you think of me years down the line  
You can't find one good thing to say  
And I'd hope that if I found the strength to walk out  
You'd stay the hell out of my way  
I am drowning  
There is no sign of land  
You are coming down with me  
Hand in unlovable hand  
And I hope you die  
I hope we both die<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Darnielle has given so many interviews and offered so many observations on his songs that it would be practically impossible for a critic not to be swayed by the author's expressed intentions relative to these songs' meanings. Nonetheless, I will try to keep my interpretive criticism as close to the lyrics (and arrangements) as possible, advertent to non-textual referents only when these constitute common knowledge, easily verified (for example, the relation of "Matthew 25:21" on *The Life of the World to Come* (4AD, 2009) to the weeks surrounding Darnielle's mother-in-law's death).

<sup>4</sup> *The Sunset Tree* (4AD, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Thus, although one of the most-loved songs in the Mountain Goats' repertoire, "The Best Ever Death Metal Band In Denton," concludes with a repeated "Hail Satan!", the lyric gives abundant reason to recognise that Darnielle is expressing sympathy for the song's two thwarted teenage musicians rather than sympathy for the devil.

<sup>6</sup> "No Children," *Tallahassee* (4AD, 2002).

The couple doesn't, in the end of their saga, consummate their bitterness in mutual homicide ("Alpha Omega"<sup>7</sup>). Neither do they simply divorce one another, nor settle into a bogus sentimental assurance that underneath the bilious vituperation, they really are fond of each other. The Alpha Couple are bound together by a love that corrodes and consumes them. Darnielle's willingness to allow such characters to express the very human dissonance in their personalities well suits him to interpret the Bible with sensitivity to its characters' and its plots' wayward contradictions.

The Mountain Goats have long drawn on biblical texts and motifs in their prodigious songbook. At times, their songs simply juxtapose a biblical reference with a contrasting situation in the exposition of the song. In other instances, the biblical allusion provides a frame within which to view the song's narrative (for instance, "1 Corinthians 13:8-10"<sup>8</sup> does not mention any element of the passage, but concerns the precariousness and durability of love under hostile circumstances). Most often, the biblical point(s) of reference comment obliquely on the situation the song describes.

One of the band's earliest releases, *The Hound Chronicles*,<sup>9</sup> includes one song entitled "שקט" that simply confronts the narrator's partner with the repeated assertion that (in contravention of the title word) "I can't keep quiet," while another ("Lab Rat Blues") addresses an unnamed Other as "maker of all things. . . with your own hands" — but instead of expressing conventional reverence or awe, the song professes an strong, almost erotic attraction to the subject of the song. With words that might evoke the Samaritan woman of John 4 ("you saw me first / living water to quench my thirst"),<sup>10</sup> the narrator affirms lifelong love for the Other. The song touches the notes from John 4 so gently, though, that the song can simply be heard as a promise of one lover's affection for another who, by changing the beloved's life, makes a whole new world of it.<sup>11</sup> Both songs illustrate John Darnielle's inclination, from the beginnings of his recording career, to invoke the Bible without modulating directly into cloying pieties, defiant blasphemies, or historical criticism.

---

<sup>7</sup> "Alpha Omega," *Protein Source of the Future... Now!*, (3 Beads of Sweat, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> "1 Corinthians 13:8-10," *Nothing For Juice* (Ajax Records, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> *The Hound Chronicles*, (Shrimper Records, 1992). John Darnielle has bracketed his earlier release, *Taboo VI: The Homecoming* (Shrimper Records, 1991), as more of a warm-up than an actual, fully canonical Mountain Goats album. The unreleased material from this period evidently includes "John 4:35," discussed in n. 9 below, and "How I Left the Ministry" and "History of the Church (Part One)." The former recounts the reflections of an adulterous pastor; the latter, a summary of Polycarp's encounter with Marcion. The unreleased songs are catalogued on Jon Nall's essential discography and lyrics site (<http://www.themountangoats.net/>), without which much of the research for this essay would have been unthinkable. Quotations from lyrics are usually drawn from Nall's site, though I have sometimes emended Nall's transcriptions based on my own hearing of the lyrics.

<sup>10</sup> The Mountain Goats apparently have performed (circa 1993) another song, unrecorded, entitled "John 4:35," that again recounts the singer's love in tandem with motifs from John 4: ran my fingers thorough your hair / and the sun beat down through the windshield / can you remember the heat? / and the taste of your tongue was thick and pure and impossibly sweet / and the fields are white unto harvest."

<sup>11</sup> Cp. "First Day of My Life" by Bright Eyes, from *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning* (Saddle Creek, 2005).

Darnielle frequently invokes the crisis of Genesis 3 — without, however, focusing on “man’s first disobedience.” Instead of telling tales about temptation and fruit, Darnielle parses the effects of the primordial transgression: exile, alienation, labour. The serpent in particular draws his attention. In “Cobra Tattoo,” “How To Embrace A Swamp Creature,” and “Supergenesis,”<sup>12</sup> the narrator identifies himself with the exiled, alienated, accursed snake. The earliest of these, “Cobra Tattoo,” narrates at the same time three transactions — perhaps more. On one reading, the song follows a scene of courtship and flirtation between two human contemporaries, a singer and a tattooed woman. At the same time, a figurative reading may regard *both* characters as snakes; the singer self-identifies with the serpent of Genesis 3 (“You will bruise my head, I will strike your heel”), and the girl bears the totemic tattoo identifying her with the cobra. Or one may finally see the scene as an interaction between the Genesis serpent and Eve (marked on her arm as a sign of the serpent’s prior temptation). On this last reading, the snake imagines wooing the tattooed woman from a position of celestial authority — Darnielle cites from the Daystar/Lucifer passage from Isaiah 14 in the second verse: “Higher than the stars / I will set my throne” — but then adds to it John the Baptist’s warning to the crowds, “God does not need Abraham / God can raise children from stones,” evidently reasoning that if God can raise up children from stones, God can restore arms and legs to a snake. The serpent of “Cobra Tattoo” patiently awaits the time when he will be transformed from his reptilian condition to the dominion to which he aspires; he urges the girl to “dream at night,” in which dreams he may communicate with her (“Try to let these garbled transmissions come through”).

On a more recent album, Darnielle returns to the serpent's longing for transformation with the song, “How to Embrace a Swamp Creature.” As in the earlier song, the most prominent aspect of “Swamp Creature” concerns two ordinary humans (in this case they’re ex-lovers who meet one another and embrace in a perhaps-spontaneous encounter after they’ve broken up). Here the refrain makes explicitly impossible what “Cobra Tattoo” leaves undefined — that the two lovers, or would-be lovers, belong to two different species (“I’m out of my element / I can’t breathe”). Thus the resonance with the third possible dimension of “Cobra Tattoo” — the singer again identifying himself with the reptile aspiring to a relationship with a human woman — comes to the fore. Although in the first half of the first verse he knows himself accursed with serpenthood, in the second half he is the human visitor who stands in the doorway with his arms at his side. But in this song, Darnielle invokes the myth of the Swamp Creature to explain how an ex-boyfriend can be simulatneously human and reptilian. As in “Cobra Tattoo,” the singer is ultimately barred from the connection he longs for; Cobra Tattoo’s invocation of Isaiah 14 foregrounds the snake’s aspiration to be a star, but neglects Jehovah’s implacable determination to stymie any such transformation; in Swamp Creature, the way back into the Eden of the lost relationship is barred by the flashing swords of the cherubim despite the “clean slate” he tries to achieve while washing up in her bathroom. Although the couple may for one night fulfil God’s command that they be fruitful and multiply, no more good can come of this liaison than did women’s encounters with the Creature from the Black Lagoon. He’s out of his element, he can’t breathe; he panics and flees. “I made it through town somehow / but who's going to save me now?”

The transfigured serpent reappears in “Supergenesis,” although in this song Darnielle

---

<sup>12</sup> “Cobra Tattoo,” *Get Lonely* (4AD, 2006); “How to Embrace a Swamp Creature,” *Heretic Pride* (4AD, 2008); “Supergenesis,” *Black Pear Tree* (with Kaki King) (Cadmaean Dawn, 2008).

sticks solely to the snake's longing to regain use of his lost limbs, so as to mount an attack against the forces that hobbled him. He "tr[ies] to hoist myself up right / Again, try again," because "someday, someday the call will sound / We all, we all are gonna get up from the ground."<sup>13</sup>

Though the serpent in these songs looks forward to a rebellion, indulges in ill-advised sex, and imagines a battle (presumably against God), none of the songs vilifies him for these actions as do traditional assessments of that ascribe to him diabolical evil. But neither does Darnielle present the snake as the wronged victim of an unjust judge; "in the twinkling of an eye, my sentence gets passed" ("Supergenesis"), but the snake doesn't complain about the judgment. Darnielle describes how it might be to be the serpent, perhaps eliciting sympathy, but mainly opening up a rich imaginative connection to serpentine existence (and specifically to the existence of a Genesis serpent). These songs display the solidarity in which humanity shares the serpent's alienated condition by interweaving vignettes of human exile and hope with the serpent's curse and hope for restoration. In contrast to biblical scholars', and most popular interpreters', determination to prove a point for or against God, Darnielle doesn't damn or praise the serpent: he listens for the serpent's voice, and finds the serpent in very human predicaments.<sup>14</sup>

As Darnielle refrains from demonising or lionising the serpent, so when he connects biblical passages with his vignettes of lovers, he directs his audience's attention to the hard work of love rather than to sentimentality. Indeed, his interaction with biblical texts on love closely reflects his sequence of songs about the Alpha Couple; he recognises the perilous power of love even in less obviously poisonous relationships. Love, in the Mountain Goats' songbook, requires labour and risk almost (but not quite) to the exclusion of bliss; and such bliss as attends love is itself a source of danger. The ardent couple in "New Chevrolet In Flames"<sup>15</sup> express their rapture with the urgency of the Song of Songs' "Kiss me with the kisses of your mouth / For your mouth is sweeter than wine," but the song pivots to grant that the beloved's mouth "has a more complicated history than the American South." The lovers consummate their passion by test-driving a car, taking it behind a nearby high school, and setting it on fire: "all that's left for us now are moments like these."

Likewise in the song "Love Love Love,"<sup>16</sup> Darnielle warns that love (as money or fun) entails danger and desperation.

King Saul fell on his sword when it all went wrong,  
And Joseph's brothers sold him down the river for a song,  
And Sonny Liston rubbed some tiger balm into his glove.  
Some things you do for money and some you do for love love love.

---

<sup>13</sup> Darnielle's "Genesis 3:23" from *The Life of the World to Come*, concentrates solely on the expulsion of the human occupants from Eden; it will be discussed below.

<sup>14</sup> While the complex of images of serpents in the Bible — including Jesus' instruction to be "wise as serpents and guileless as doves," John the Baptist's calling the Pharisees a brood of vipers, and so on — surely enrich the resonance of the figure in these songs, it is less clear that the songs draw deliberately on those resonances.

<sup>15</sup> "New Chevrolet in Flames," *See America Right* (4AD, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> "Love Love Love," *The Sunset Tree*.

In what sense was any of these done for love (much less the emphatic thrice repeated “love” of the song)? Liston’s chicanery<sup>17</sup> aimed at money, but just as much at the acclaim of remaining world boxing champion; Joseph’s brothers profited by selling him to itinerant Midianites, but their initial motivation was resentment at Joseph’s special standing with their father; and Saul’s suicide was motivated by shame at losing the battle at Mount Gilboa. Yet because Darnielle allows only money or love as explanations for these actions, the possibility that love motivated these figures (Saul loved Jonathan, who had died in battle; the brothers envied the love between Israel and Joseph; Liston, perhaps, loved the championship). When Darnielle next enlists Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov and rock martyr Kurt Cobain, the connection to love becomes even harder to sustain. But Darnielle supplies an explanatory bridge:

Love, love is going to take you by the hand  
Into a white and soundless place  
Now we see as in a mirror dimly  
Then we shall see each other face to face

Whatever the specific causes for the actions to which the song alludes, Darnielle gathers them and writes them into a context framed by “love” and by the references to biblical figures. The love of which he thus sings is bound up with death and nothingness, with the opacity of human motivation and with betrayal, cheating, murder, and suicide. “Love Love Love” contrasts the saccharine sentimental repetition in its title with the nihilistic grimness of mortal motivation — yet nonetheless returns to the expectation of an ultimate resolution that will bring us all out of confusion, misery, and hostility into revelatory solidarity

These paragraphs have explored only two of the paths along the Mountain Goats’ stream of biblical interpretation. One might go further and trace other dimensions of Christian theological allusions in their lyrics: recurrent reference to rosary beads, transfiguration, apocalyptic eschatology, and various borrowings from gospel music traditions. These examples, however, suffice to make the case that distributed among the numerous tapes, albums, and CDs (and even more numerous individual songs), the Mountain Goats have been painting with biblical colours since their earliest releases.<sup>18</sup>

Thus when Darnielle announced the tracklist for the Mountain Goats’ 2009 album *The Life of the World To Come*, his listeners might not have been surprised that all the tracks on the record bore titles consisting of references to biblical verses. After all, he had culminated his scattered songs about the Alpha Couple with a full album of songs about them (*Tallahassee*); he had followed up the various allusions to the abusive household of his youth in the autobiographical *The Sunset Tree*; his songs reflecting on life in the drug underworld developed into *We Shall All Be Healed*. Two of his three previous releases — *Heretic Pride* and the *Satanic Messiah*<sup>19</sup> EP — bore obviously theological titles. Darnielle had given plentiful

---

<sup>17</sup>. It has been alleged that in Liston’s first fight against Cassius Clay (yet to adopt the name “Muhammad Ali”), he treated his gloves with some substance to irritate Clay’s eyes.

<sup>18</sup>. The prominence of biblical allusions are amplified by video clips and text fragments on the websites dedicated to the 4AD albums *Tallahassee* (<http://www.4ad.com/tallahassee/>) and *We Shall All Be Healed* (<http://www.4ad.com/weshallallbehealed/>).

<sup>19</sup>. *Satanic Messiah* (Cadmaean Dawn, 2008).

advance warning of his on-going interest in the Bible.

Still, the Mountain Goats fan forum threads lit up with dismay at this news. Indeed, the prevalent response was skeptical hesitancy at best (“I guess I’ll trust John,” or “I’ll like anything John does, even if it involves the Bible”<sup>20</sup>), while several fans voiced hostile rejection of the album. “Will I have to go to a Bible study to understand the new album?” one asked, and another complained, “I don’t want to hear John preaching.” Listeners who hadn’t flinched at the biblical coloration of “Love Love Love” or “Elijah”<sup>21</sup> balked at the prospect of “Ezekiel 7 and the Permanent Efficacy of Grace.”<sup>22</sup>

The precursors of *The Life of the World to Come* are certainly prominent enough in retrospect. *Heretic Pride*<sup>23</sup> included “New Zion,” a song that describes a cult whose elements include the high priest of Salem, “signs up in the sky,” and the self-regeneration of combustible faith, and also “How To Embrace A Swamp Creature” (described above), both theologically-dense topics. Further, “Sept 15 1983” narrates the murder of reggae star Prince Far I with a refrain drawn from the Rastafarian appropriation of the Psalms (“If I forget you Israel / Let me forget my right hand”), and the title track reports the exalted anticipation of the singer’s martyrdom by burning (presumably for heresy, though without specifying any particular doctrinal point of transgression). Nothing in the song “Heretic Pride” requires that its hero be a victim of Christian oppression; since Darnielle has written a song about Polycarp of Smyrna, one ought not assume that he was unaware that Christians also were put to death for their deviance from prevailing social orders. “San Bernardino” narrates a type of nativity scene; “So Desperate” unfolds “in our neutral meeting place, the Episcopalian churchyard.” While *Heretic Pride* involves plenty of other topics, many of them tinged more with the macabre than with the holy, it makes an amply plausible point of departure for *The Life of the World To Come*’s themes.

Moreover, the Mountain Goats’ repertoire between albums heightens the prominence of theological motifs. The *Black Pear Tree* collaboration with Kaki King includes “Supergenesis,” the most recent of Darnielle’s “serpent” songs. The very title of the *Satanic Messiah* EP by itself constitutes an obvious indication — though the song invokes its “messiah” (whose stage appearance exhilarates his audience: “we were all made young”) principally as the setting for the narrator’s search for a friend. The EP also includes “Wizard Buys A Hat,” a song that characterises its rough urban scenario as a church with congregants, inhabited by its enemies. The Mountain Goats have also performed (but have

---

<sup>20</sup> These responses are summarised from threads posted at the Mountain Goats forums, <<http://www.mountain-goats.com/forums/list.php?2>>; since the exact postings can be (and have been) edited, I have given a synthesised sample rather than trying to pin down exact quotations.

<sup>21</sup> “Elijah,” *The Coroner’s Gambit* (Absolutely Kosher, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> These anticipatory responses aptly illustrate the predisposition toward reactive binarism on which I will have more to say later.

<sup>23</sup> Darnielle dimly recalled the phrase that became the album’s title from the lyric of a song by a Norwegian metal band, <[http://drownedinsound.com/in\\_depth/2800016](http://drownedinsound.com/in_depth/2800016)>. He collaborated on a press kit for the album, with commentary on the songs therein, with musician/comics artist Jeffrey Lewis, <<http://www.thejeffreylewisite.com/Mt-Goats-Press-Kit-08.html>>.



not yet formally released) two further noteworthy songs in this vein. “Down to the Ark,”<sup>24</sup> a song commissioned by American Public Radio for the Super Tuesday primary election, suggests a specifically political, searingly bleak dimension of “Satanic Messiah.” In “Messiah,” the defining figure of the song is advertised with blue-and-red posters reminiscent of Shepard Fairey’s memorable “Hope” posters for Barack Obama’s presidential campaign,<sup>25</sup> a single spell-binding figure who charms all hearers; here, the candidates *all* “said a brief invocation to their cloven-hoofed prince / And. . . signed their names in blood on the vestry wall.” Darnielle contrasts Christ,<sup>26</sup> in whom “there’s neither high nor low,” with the candidates’ allegiance to the “order of the serpent,” in which “there’ll be neither left nor right,” but we will vote and receive stickers as a type of the mark of the Beast. Finally, in the unreleased “Sign of the Crow 2,” Darnielle describes the discovery of the image of the Sorrowful and Immaculate Heart of Mary in Ollignies, associated with the Belgian mystic Berthe Petit. To this pious legend, Darnielle adds the monitory refrain “Of the several things that you have to do today / You’re gonna regret one / This generation asks for a sign / It isn’t gonna get one” drawing on Mark 8:12 and parallels. The escalating theological tenor of the Mountain Goats’ work in 2008 and 2009 should have prepared alert listeners to the possibility, if not the likelihood, that the next album would continue the trajectory of the past three releases.

*The Life of the World to Come* displays the breadth of Darnielle’s compositional devices. Though all the songs bear biblical titles, only a few quote explicitly from the verses for which they’re named. Some songs’ titles serve as oblique commentary on the lyric; some of the titles contrast sharply with the vignettes Darnielle sings. One song quotes from its the passage that serves as its title, but takes that quotation in a startlingly impious direction; two quote from their titular passages in a way that complements, at least to some extent, the biblical content. In all of the album’s songs, however, Darnielle fends off simple adoration, didacticism, polemics, or repulsion; while no bleakness overcomes the light, the light fares pretty poorly against the power of pain, cruelty, and despair.

To start, “Genesis 3:23” — the third song on the album<sup>27</sup> — describes its

---

<sup>24</sup>. <<http://weekendamerica.publicradio.org/display/web/2008/01/31/mtngoats/>>

<sup>25</sup>. Though, to be fair, blue and red would also characterise almost any US electoral event, as well as some in the UK, and probably numerous athletic teams and rock bands as well.

<sup>26</sup>. Darnielle hardly ever mentions “Jesus” or “Christ” by name; in the whole 500-plus song Mountain Goats repertoire, I can identify only two that mention Jesus, and in one of them the name is used simply as an expletive (the desperately beautiful “Your Belgian Things” from *We Shall All Be Healed*). In an album by The Extra Glens, a side project with collaborator Franklin Bruno, Darnielle compares a particular love to Jesus, “but worse. / Though you seal the cave up where you’ve lain its body, it rises” (“Going to Marrakesh” from *Martial Arts Weekend, Absolutely Kosher*, 2002). Likewise, apart from this mention in “Down to the Ark,” Christ appears only in “Dilaudid,” when the singer exhorts his lover to “take your foot off the brake / for Christ’s sake.”

<sup>27</sup>. As is so often the case, there is no simple, canonical album-as-such. *The Life of the World to Come* has been released in several different editions with different contents. A Japanese edition includes another two songs, “Enoch 18:14” and “Proverbs 6: 27”; Apple’s iTunes Music Store includes only “Enoch 18:14” as a bonus. Amazon’s online digital store offers the album with “Proverbs 6:27” as a bonus track. Moreover, some CDs purchased from

protagonist picking the lock of the house in which he once lived. He enters and muses about himself and his family as they once dwelt there, and wonders about the people who live there now. After leaving his former house, he returns to his present home and “breaks the lock on [his] own garden gate.” The title verse from Genesis lights these events with the colours of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden. Since the singer no longer lives in the first house, since he may have lived there as a child, one might identify the first house as a type of Eden. But his life there was not Edenic, as he hopes that the current occupants “are better at [living here] than I was.” At the same time, when he returns to his own current home, he breaks the lock to gain entrance to the garden. Wherever he goes, the singer finds himself on the wrong side of locked doors; wherever he goes, he breaks in to what should be home. The song works satisfactorily on the terms of its lyrics alone, but by framing it with the biblical title Darnielle adds deep resonances (and dissonances) to the short narrative sketch. Similarly, the narrative of “1 John 4:16” — involving someone facing harrowing danger (metonymised as “the beast”) — must move beyond “the holding cell I’ve built myself,” but finds reassurance in the memories of past love and the confidence that the beloved is thinking of him. Here the song is strengthened both by its title’s allusion to 1 John 4:16, but also from the subsequent verse 18, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

Three other songs follow this general pattern. One reflects on the absoluteness of mortality by focusing on three species of extinct animals (the Tasmanian tiger, the dodo, and the golden toad); in three quiet verses, Darnielle gently drives home the finality of extinction, the loneliness of being the last of one’s kind, whether of a vanished species or a childless family. The song’s title, “Deuteronomy 2:10,” associates these creatures — and the singer — with the Emim, who formerly lived in Ar, “a people great and many, and tall as the Anakim.” While “Deuteronomy 2:10” stands adequately well apart from its biblical precedent, “Genesis 30:3” inhabits its biblical environment more explicitly; the lovers of the song live in tents, and encounter mysterious visitors from unknown origins. One of the lovers concedes some momentous gesture to another; “I will do what you ask me to do / Because of how I feel about you.” The title seems to identify the situation as Rachel requesting that Jacob father a child by Bilhah, but the song complicates that apparently direct allusion. On one hand, if the singer is to be identified with Jacob, it’s hard to explain why he would be reluctant to father children by Bilhah, since he has already been busily procreating with Leah (and would subsequently go in to Zilpah as well). On the other hand, he has already laboured fourteen years for the prerogative to marry Rachel, ample evidence that he *would* do anything for her. On a third hand, however, the earlier stage-dressing of the song — the mysterious strangers’ visit, the direct address to a dumbstruck dubious lover — resonate with the saga of Abram and Sarai in Genesis 16 - 21. Darnielle so blurs the specificity of the narrative as to focus on the intense feelings that develop among “a man, a

---

Rough Trade included a second album of demos and out-takes entitled *The Life of the World In Flux*. And the *The Life of the World to Come* DVD of Darnielle performing the songs from this album includes “Enoch 18:14” (along with commentary on the songs and an extra question-and-answer session with Darnielle and director Rian Johnson). Rather than fret over how to define a canonical list of the contents of *The Life of the World to Come*, I will stipulate the dozen songs common to all releases of the recording, and will pass over the deuterocanonical material.

woman, another woman, and then the child who belongs to all three of them”<sup>28</sup> as to draw on the feelings from the smaller family unit of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar, but also the explicitly extraordinary love between Jacob and Rachel, and the challenges that might beset such a triangular relationship in the present.

The last of the songs in which the title bears most of the weight of biblical reference is “Matthew 25:21,” an account of Darnielle’s participation in a vigil at his mother-in-law’s deathbed. The song alternates its focus between a more dispassionate (though powerfully evocative) description of the events as they unfold, and the singer’s feeling of devastating catastrophic loss. The refrain compares Darnielle first to a truck careening down a highway, out of control; then to an airplane likewise “tumbling wing over wing.” Each of these choruses concludes with Darnielle expressing concern for others: “Try not to hurt too many people when I roll” [the truck], and “I hope we’re all in crash position when we hit.” The third chorus departs from this pattern, though, by characterising Darnielle’s mother-in-law — “you were a presence full of light upon this earth / And I am a witness to your life and to its worth” — then noting that whereas the trucker and pilot were straining to protect others from the consequences of their crashes, “It’s three days later when I get the call / And there’s nobody around to break my fall.” The song’s powerful effect derives so much from the writing, the spare arrangement, and the emotionally-intense performance that in this case, the biblical reference (“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master”<sup>29</sup>) serves principally to ratify the song’s testimony to Darnielle’s mother-in-law, rather than adding a dimension that would otherwise be missed.

While in these songs, the title comments on the song in a way consonant with the lyric’s emphasis, Darnielle takes the opposite tack in several of other the album’s tracks. “Philippians 3:20-21” upholds the unwavering misery of affliction against the illusory consolations of heavenly support (“But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.”). The singer looks on as “nice” well-wishers, like Job’s friends, offer only a grotesque parody of understanding and solidarity; even the angel choirs that the depressed sufferer hears are only smoke alarms.

[Y]ou hear of people who suffered their entire life that, once they die, now their [*sic*] won't have bad days, because they're with God. People say that.

And you think, well, maybe God could have been more merciful and let them off the hook earlier. Brought them into this place of no suffering and eternal bliss and presence of the most high a lot earlier and saved this person a lot of unnecessary pain, instead of having them suffer their entire lives.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup>. *The Life of the World to Come* DVD, accompanying booklet, s.v. “Genesis 30:3.”

<sup>29</sup>. Cited from the RSV to avoid the use of “slave” in the NRSV (which would be jarring in this context).

<sup>30</sup>. “John Darnielle Tells the Story Behind the Mountain Goats' Biblical New LP,” *Pitchfork* September 8, 2009 <<http://pitchfork.com/news/36406-john-darnielle-tells-the-story-behind-the-mountain-goats-biblical-new-lp/>>. Darnielle has indicated in concerts and interviews that this song refers to the suffering and suicide of David Foster Wallace.

The song introduces the imagery of mental illness and psychiatric hospitals to reveal the fatuity of the assurance that “he was with God now / Safe in his arms.”

In two other songs as well — “1 Samuel 15:23,” “Hebrews 11:40” — the setting of the song flies in the face of the title. “1 Samuel 15:23” repeatedly identifies its subject as a “crystal healer,” whereas 1 Samuel decries the sin of divination; “Hebrews 11:40” unfolds among a coven of witches. In both of these, Darnielle deploys the contrasting biblical title to display the possibility that the crystal healer of “1 Samuel” is not a maleficent enchanter dedicated to a degraded deity, nor a mere charlatan; he provides clothing and shelter for outcasts, and heals the sick. His account of himself sounds more like the description of the works of the Messiah in Matthew 11:1-6, on the basis of which one might (biblically) say regarding the healer, “Blessed is whoever takes no offence at him.” The coven of “Hebrews 11:40” seem to be working against death, as the protagonist affirms over and over that “I feel certain I am going to rise again / If not by faith then by the sword / I’m going to be restored.” On the most familiar terms, the song concerns zombies (“Bodies reassembling down where the worms crawl,” and “I’m gonna get my perfect body back someday”), but its association of these unauthorised resurrection-men and -women with Hebrews 11 displays the ambiguity of biblical teaching about God’s action in the bodily resurrection of all (the unclarity that also bedevils Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, where he struggles to define just how a “spiritual body” differs from other sorts).

“Ezekiel 7 and the Permanent Efficacy of Grace” teeters on the pivot between consonance and contrast. The narrator is a torturer-murderer from a Mexican drug cartel, exactly the sort of blood-befouled villain who stands under God’s condemnation. Yet both the text of Ezekiel 7 and the second half of the song’s title fend off indiscriminate dismissal; the evildoers in Ezekiel are doing God’s work by afflicting the nation that has lost its moral orientation, and an affirmation of “the permanent efficacy of grace” prevents supposing that we can know the torturer to be lost. Or, if we decline to question the comprehensive depravity of the assassin, the horrible calm with which the song notes that “someone will need to mop this floor for me” may be read as an indictment of any theology that would find a basis for redemption in so repugnant a fiend.

The blessed/damned torturer of “Ezekiel 7” represents the extreme instance of a gratuitous wickedness from which the protagonists of “Psalms 40:2,” one of only three songs on the album that actually quote from the verses in their titles. The singer incorporates the psalm verse in the second line of the chorus, “He has fixed his sign in the sky / He has raised me from the pit and set me high” — but the singer exults not because “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8), but because of the buzz he and his partner get from vandalising a roadside chapel and inhaling the gas from the spray paint cans (“Pulled off the highway in Missouri and lo, our hearts were heavy laid / Made for the chapel with some spray paint for all the things we’d held in secret,” “Left that place in ruins, drunk on the Spirit and high on fumes . . .”). Continuing the duo’s destructive path into Kansas, the singer feels a pang of conscience, then begs, “Lord send me a mechanic / If I’m not beyond repair.” Where the torturer of “Ezekiel 7” betrays no instant of remorse, the Spirit-huffing vandal senses something wrong, and turns for remediation (if that be possible) to the God who send the exultation that fills his mouth with praise.

The other two songs that use their title verses in the body of the song make connections more congruent with the tenor of their quotations, though not even these cases escape the persistent ambivalence of the album. “Isaiah 45:23” forms a pair with “Philippians 3:20-21,” though in “Isaiah” the sufferer sings in the first person, and in this

case the sufferer refuses to yield to his afflictions:

If my prayer goes unanswered that's alright  
If my path fills with darkness and there is no sign of light  
Let me praise you for the good times, let me hold your banner high  
Until the hills are flattened and the rivers all run dry

And I won't get better but someday I'll be free  
'Cause I am not this body that imprisons me

The narrator's confidence in God strikes an unusually positive note for this album, but the catalogue of specific woes he faces — possible death, redoubled suffering, failing eyes, fever, migrating pain — overshadow the mildly-expressed affirmation of constant faith. Yes, the patient maintains hope (albeit a gnostic, anti-somatic hope), but Darnielle reads the song with a weariness that accents his anguish and mutes his confidence.

In a very similar way, "Romans 10:9" incorporates the Pauline formula "If you will believe in your heart and confess with your lips / Surely you will be saved one day" in a breezily upbeat arrangement, such that a casual listener might construe this as nothing short of a bid for Christian radio airplay. And yet — once again, the protagonist is determined to stay positive in the face of a crushing anxiety that Darnielle describes so vividly as to call into question his narrator's fragile assertion of faith. Having gotten only one hour's sleep, the narrator cautiously ventures out into burning daylight, frightened, depressed — "but," he exhorts himself, "come on make a joyful sound." At his wit's end, he can no longer imagine any way he might improve his lot, and as protection he seeks out "busy hours for joyful hearts." Although he dutifully fills his prescriptions, he doesn't bother taking the drugs since "a kind and loving God won't let my small ship run aground."<sup>31</sup> The lyric risks devolving into cruel mockery at the faith this soul vests in the same God whom Darnielle has been excoriating in "Philippians," but in performance the singer conveys sympathetic admiration for someone who, beset by the disabling troubles of mental illness, nonetheless marshals the determination to go out into the world trusting in this unreliable deity.<sup>32</sup>

In each song, then — and especially in the ensemble of songs that comprise *The Life of the World to Come* heard together — the Mountain Goats weave their interpretation of the Bible into the vignettes in their songs by foregrounding, in each instance, the tangles and

---

<sup>31</sup> During the bridge, the narrator reminds himself to "Look for the sign of Daniel," an especially intriguing phrase for biblical interpreters since there *is* no strong convention for identifying a "sign" of Daniel. Darnielle probably refers to the handwriting on the Belshazzar's wall (Dan 5), since that is the story that most prominently features something like a sign (and the song continues, "Consider the clues / Wait as long as I have to for good news"); but one could quite plausibly argue for a sign in Daniel's immunity to lions (Dan 6), or the Three Young Men's surviving the fire in Daniel 3, or the coming of the Human Son (Dan 7) or of Michael (Dan 12).

<sup>32</sup> Interviewers have regularly asked Darnielle about the catchy, affirmative chorus of "Romans." He answers with incredulity that anyone could find the song optimistic, with its unmedicated, agoraphobic, insomniac subject. In this, though, I suspect that Darnielle's audience has heard something in his song to which the songwriter's intentions blind him.

ruptures of both the biblical plots and figures, and the contemporary lives with which they intersect. Rather than trying to shoehorn biblical narratives and perspectives into unworlly consistency, Darnielle matches the incongruities of the Bible to his audience's incongruous experiences. Rather than rejecting the Bible's wayward characters and unpredictable God, he matches the wounds of the Bible to his audience's wounds.

In so doing, he demonstrates what makes him so much better a biblical interpreter than many other musicians, and better also than many professional biblical scholars. Darnielle doesn't expect the Bible to provide him definitive *meanings*; he receives the Bible more as the "cryptic symbols" of "Palmcorder Yajna," the "unknown alphabets in spray paint" from "Daniel 12:8 (third),"<sup>33</sup> or the "garbled transmission" of "Cobra Tattoo." Where readers strain to sand down rough spots of the Bible, explain incomprehensible parts, or dismiss embarrassing passages, Darnielle bears with the awkwardness and writes it into song.

In so doing, Darnielle defies the binary mania of the recording industry by refusing both the controlling embraces of categorically Christian music (on one hand) and the defiantly secular (and in many cases "anti-ecclesiastical") mainstream rock marketplace.<sup>34</sup> The Mountain Goats' presentation of biblical tropes is generally sympathetic, even when it's contrarian; the frustrations and challenges that characterise *The Life of the World to Come* remain as steadfastly within the ambit of the biblical world as do the Psalms and Lamentations. On the other hand, Darnielle's qualified fascination falls far short of the norms expected of official, Gospel Music Association-certified Christian rock (even more so when one considers the Mountain Goats' songs that allude to the devil, and those with Vedic and Meso-American religious themes). The Mountain Goats sing of a more ambivalent sort of faith — steadfast and wounded, sin-soaked but hopeful — and instantiate it in lyrical narrative as a possible standpoint for their audience.

They also exemplify a way of reading the Bible that doesn't comport well with the sorts of distinctions that frequently inhabit the interpretive discourse of professional biblical criticism. One would seek in vain for Darnielle to suggest that a *historical* reading of a particular verse legitimates his lyrical exposition. Neither, of course, does he back up his interpretive approach from creedal or magisterial authority. The standing of the Bible relative to Darnielle's compositions derives from the extent to which he and his audience sense that he is telling the truth about the world in his (biblical) idiom.

As we biblical professionals return from smoky concert halls and solitary mp3 players where we enjoy the music that we love, to the fluorescent lights of seminar rooms, lecture halls, and conference panels where we propound our own interpretations, we might do well to bear in mind the limitations that we produce when we exclude middle terms. The texts we study provide ample grounds for complementary and contradictory readings, historical and theological, social-scientific and liberatory-political, technical and lyrical. Our best, most enduring interpretations derive their power to convince not from overheated

---

<sup>33</sup> "Daniel 12:8 (third)," from *The Life of the World in Flux*, bonus CD with *The Life of the World to Come*.

<sup>34</sup> The field of non-"Christian rock" theologically-interested rock performers has grown considerably over recent years. The behemoth of ~~Christian~~ rock bands, of course, is U2; but Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, the Hold Steady, Sufjan Stevens, Will Oldham, Sinéad O'Connor, Pedro the Lion/David Bazan, and Daniel Johnston have entered the field with prominent theological dimensions to their catalogue without seeking the benediction of the guardians of safe Christian music.

claims about bias, ideological correctness, or methodological legitimacy, but from reading carefully and well, and from attending well to the myriad ways of heartbreak and hope in this world. After all, we have not yet come to a time when we can claim to have learned in any definite way what these cryptic symbols mean.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup>. My thanks to the participants in the Mountain Goats forums at <<http://www.mountain-goats.com/forums/index.php>>, for lively conversation, helpful suggestions, obscure bits of information, and the delight of shared appreciation for the Mountain Goats.