This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Journal for Cultural Research* on 19/10/2020, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14797585.2020.1826737>.

Introduction: Scott Walker’s ‘New Songs *2016 / 17*’

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**Abstract**

The Introduction to the special issue on Scott Walker briefly highlights the different disciplinary engagements of the essays that follow and offers its own analysis of Walker’s last songs from the perspective of the tradition of lyric poetry. Scott Walker, who died in March 2019, transcended the field of popular music where he first established himself in the 1960s to produce in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries extraordinary and challenging work that defies generic definition. For novelist Eimear McBride, Walker ‘made some of the most important contributions to the modernist tradition since Beckett’ (McBride, 2019). The essays in this volume of the *Journal for Cultural Research* by Adam Potts, Malte Kobel, Sabeen Chaudhry, Matt Selway and Charlie Blake bring Walker’s later work into conjunction with current thinking in literary, sound and screen studies, and writing in philosophy, musicology and theory fiction. In the Introduction, Scott Wilson looks specifically at the ‘New Songs’ that were included in *Sundog*, Walker’s collection of lyrics and assesses them with reference to Jonathan Culler’s recent book *Theory of the Lyric*. Culler’s book outlines four parameters of the lyric tradition from Sappho and Horace to Williams and Ashbury: enunciative apparatus, hyperbole, ritual and event (rather than mimesis or representation). In this Introduction, Wilson examines the contention that Scott Walker’s lyrics mount a ‘silent defence of this forgotten logic of the lyric’ (Nicola Masciandaro) that has been displaced by the dominant novel-driven aesthetic whose fictional worlds and persona frame or showcase the implied subjectivity of the poet or novelist. In so doing, Wilson suggests that the lyrics of popular song have more in common with the ancient tradition of lyric poetry than modern or contemporary verse.

Key words: Scott Walker, *Sundog*, Jonathan Culler, lyric poetry.

I *The Lyric Poet at the End of the World*

On 25 March 2019 the record label 4AD announced the death of the singer and composer Scott Walker. ‘For half a century, the genius of the man born Noel Scott Engel has enriched the lives of thousands’; noting how Walker’s career had progressed from the teen idol years of the Walker Brothers to a new status of cultural icon, the label continued, ‘Scott leaves to future generations a legacy of extraordinary music; a brilliant lyricist with a haunting singing voice, he has been one of the most revered innovators at the sharp end of creative music, whose influence on many artists has been freely acknowledged.’ (<https://4ad.com/news/959>)

A flurry of reports and obituaries followed in the mainstream press, all commenting on how the remarkable transformation that occurred during Walker’s life and career gave rise to remarkably transformative work. Alex Patrides acclaimed ‘one of the most extraordinary careers in pop history. Here was a completely unbiddable artist making music that sounded almost nothing like anything else’. (Patrides, 2019) For Rob Young, Walker’s music transcends the genres of rock and pop. In highlighting some of the signature features of this work, he writes, ‘very little music of the past hundred years is as bleak, bruised, disturbed, demented and diabolic as Walker’s’ (Rob Young, 2019). Novelist Eimear McBride concurred, affirming his literary as well as musical significance, Walker having, she writes, ‘made some of the most important contributions to the modernist tradition since Beckett’ (McBride, 2019). For McBride, who wrote the Preface to *Sundog* (2018) Walker’s collection of lyrics, this is because his songs ‘took the frequently visited subject of the broken person in a broken world and, rather than seek out comfort and connection, began to explore it brokenly and mercilessly’ (McBride, 2019).

The essays collected in this special issue of the *Journal for Cultural Research* bring an academic perspective to Walker’s work, partly in order to test some of these claims, but mainly to bring them into conjunction with current thinking in literary, sound and screen studies, and writing in philosophy, musicology and theory fiction. The essays were first presented at a one-day symposium on ‘The Work and Legacy of Scott Walker with Peter Walsh’ held at Kingston University’s Visconti Studio that explored the art, innovative practice, cultural impact, musical and sonic legacy of Scott Walker with Peter Walsh, Scott’s long-term producer and collaborator. It was a hybrid event that included a performance of Walker’s ‘Cocteau Voices: Duet for One’ first performed at the Royal Opera House, and a screening of Stephen Kijak’s film *30th Century Man* (2005). The symposium was attended by fans, students, musicians, journalists – including contributions from Pete Paphides, Rob Young and Eimear McBride – as well as the academics whose papers are published here. They focus on Walker’s output from 1985’s *Climate of Hunter* up to his final solo LP *Bish Bosch* (2012), *Soused* (2014) his collaboration with Sunn0))) and his recent film scores with director Brady Corbet. Given that this work leaves behind popular genres of rock music – or rather takes them into a direction that cleaves ‘to the post-war *avant garde* of Europe’ (Young, 2019), these essays start from the assumption that traditional academic approaches to rock and pop are probably not the most interesting or appropriate methods to take. Audience studies or cultural studies would not be especially fruitful because while there are still diehard fans of every aspect of Walker’s work – early and late – they don’t constitute a subculture. If Walker’s work and career provides a model for a way of life, it is one that posits an uncompromising ethical demand that one goes one’s own way, a demand that courts unpopularity almost as a necessity. Formally, that leaves musicology – especially sound studies and perhaps literary studies, among other disciplines that the themes of his work take up. In this Introduction it is the literary aspect that will be the focus, given that a year before his death, Walker published *Sundog* a collection of song lyrics that included new works that had not yet been put to music and can now only stand as a form of lyric poetry. For Brian Eno, Walker was not only a great composer and a superlative lyricist but also a significant contemporary poet. (Kijak, 2005) This claim is contentious and raises a number of questions that we will address below.

Certainly, Walker’s ‘reclusive’ profile and the lyrical ambition and often obscurity of his albums chimes with the familiar image of the romantic and modernist ‘lyric poet at work, closing himself off from the outside world’. Walker’s sometimes Joycean use of language exemplifies the poet’s traditional rejection of the language of ‘instrumental reason, prosaic efficiency and communicative transparency’ (Culler, 2015: 300, 304). Theodor Adorno in his chapter ‘On Lyric Poetry and Society’ from *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) famously argues that this exterior position is ‘dialectical’ and that the negation of society paradoxically enables the lyric poet to ensure the social value of his or her work: ‘it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect’. The ‘utopian’ form of the lyric poem provides the basis for a mode of resistance that gives ‘the subjective expression of a social antagonism’ (Adorno, 1997: 42, 45). But as these essays show, this is not quite the situation with Walker’s lyrics that are riven by social antagonism even as human society itself is lacerated by non-human forces. Walker’s songs are not separate from the social, indeed they often start from there. Many start ‘with something we know – a political issue’ (Young, 2013, 251) that then drifts and fragments across and between ‘the broken person’ that is immanent to the ‘broken world’, as McBride comments. There is in the songs no representation or imitation of the experience of a subject giving ‘subjective expression’ to his ‘social antagonism’ as if it were possible to master the field of the social from a position opposed or exterior to it, even dialectically. While Walker’s songs, lyrics and singing voice certainly constitute an enunciative event, as Malte Kobel shows, ‘Walker’s unique singing style deconstructs the notion of voice as expressive of self’. Kobel’s essay follows the traces of the ‘disidentification of voice and self-expression through … Walker’s musicking performance of the voice’. Adam Potts, following the work of Daniela Cascella, excavates ‘the unheard and unspeakable dimensions’ of Walker’s lyrics and their ‘edge work’. Potts is attentive to the ‘apocalyptic tone’ of Walker’s later works, particularly *Soused* (2014) the collaboration with Sunn0))), where this tone becomes a deeply resonant drone that reverberates from moments of disaster as voice and soundscapes ‘establish connections … between points’ disconnected from the traditional oppositions between self and society, culture and nature. While Potts notes how Walker’s song emerges from a ‘depersonalised space’, Matt Selway, in his analysis of Walker’s original score for Brady Corbet’s film *The Childhood of a Leader* (2015), shows how Walker constructs the sonic equivalent of what Gilles Deleuze calls ‘any-space-whatever’ that provides a milieu from which ‘the organic unities of narrative and setting, sound and vision that characterise classical cinema’ are disrupted. As we hear in the movie long before we see it, this space provides the ‘hole’ around which Walker’s ‘aggressive and challenging composition’, in its hyperbole and incongruous sonic extravagance, prefigures and performs the ‘megalomaniacal state’ of the war vector that the child will become at the end of the movie as he emerges as a fascist leader. It is precisely in the maelstrom produced by this sonic any-space that the movie enigmatically ends.

In contrast to the ‘becoming-war’ of the child in Corbet’s movie, Sabeen Chaudhry’s essay ‘Tongues Turning to Chalk: Scott Walker’s (sonic) Geopoetics’ pursues other modes of ‘becoming’ that are an effect, in Walker’s work, of the affective exchange between ‘the geographical, geological and cosmological in relation to the aesthetic’. In so doing, Chaudhry discloses the extent to which Walker’s songs can be described as ‘post-human’, identifying the ‘chaosmotic’ dimensions of his geopoeticism and non-representational sonic landscapes ‘to operate in a manner concurrent with our immanent entanglement in a universe that is self-organising and dis-organising, a so-called nature that also includes the human and the synthetic, and operates “against itself”’.

Charlie Blake’s theory-fiction retrospectively casts the date of the Scott Walker symposium in November 2019 as the moment when the world-narrative ended or unravelled in devastating plague, both real and imaginary, as in one of Walker’s great plague songs, ‘Cue’ from *The Drift* (2005). ‘For us, or for most of us anyway, at the very least, this is the end of the world’, and an opening to the vicissitudes of a planetary destiny indifferent to the paper world of literary and musical temporality, ‘with its broken minims and frazzled crotchets and orthogonal rhythms and oblique densities of prosaia. With its soliloquies and oubliquies and randomized logorrhoea’. Or even ‘with its devastating crush of sonic effluvia’ that nevertheless resonates, in an apocalyptic tone, with the background radiation of dying planets and a disintegrating cosmos.

Of the world

as it’s fading away.

(Scott Walker, ‘Attaché’ 2016/17. *Sundog*: 184)

II *Sundog*

Appropriately apocalyptic, Scott Walker’s lyric ‘The Boston Green Head’, the first of the six new songs published in *Sundog* written in 2016/2017, ends with the disappearance or ‘escape’ of the sun from the Western horizon of the US in the mythological form of Atum. The Egyptian god of the evening sun and of pre- and post-existence, Atum precedes Sun Ra in Heliopolitan myth. In the song Atum has ‘slipped’ from the chain he made with Khepri, the morning and mid-day sun, to form the binary cycle Khepri-Atum, never to return the East. It is not entirely clear whether he has escaped from the diurnal chain by accident or design (‘slipped’ perhaps suggests the former, while ‘escaped’ suggests the latter), but there is in any case no underworld night boat to ferry him back. The song ends, then, with a mytho-poetic account of the fracturing of the diurnal order that guarantees the survival and natural consistency of the world. This fracturing is an effect of the rending of the narrative coherence of the world in a clash of civilisations in which the boundaries that separate the East and the West, the living and the dead, ancient and modern, natural and supernatural are over-run. In the form of an Egyptian curse, it seems, the real has spoken and torn the world apart.

Formally, ‘The Boston Green Head’ performs the fragmentation of narrative through various interruptions that are drawn from the lyrical conventions of exclamation, apostrophe and rhetorical address. ‘Eunuach! Who ordered a Eunuch?!’ Exclamations open the song and its three separate sections. ‘Sun! Who ordered a Crafty Ol’ Sun?!’ Following Atum’s disappearance over the Western horizon, the song’s lyrical style breaks the chain of narrative and its beginning, middle and end. As Jonathan Culler writes in *The Theory of the Lyric* (2015), ‘disrupting narrative, invocation or address makes the poem an event in the lyric present rather than the representation of a past event’ (Culler, 2015: 8). For Culler this is what distinguishes the lyric from the modern expressive realist poem that is predicated upon the representation of a fictional subject and the imitation of real-world speech acts whose subjectivity provides the unity of the work (2015: 2). In Walker’s songs, these cries, outbursts and questions that have no definitive addressee or temporal location, are sonic enunciations that are suspended in the ‘void of a durationless now’ poised between a once-present existence and whatever future that might attend to them (Heidegger, 1971: 142).

I want to argue that, following Culler, Walker’s songs have more in common with the ancient tradition of lyric poetry than modern or contemporary verse. I want to defend the contention (suggested to me by Nicola Masciandaro) that Walker’s lyrics mount a ‘silent defence of this forgotten logic of the lyric’ that has been displaced by the dominant novel-driven aesthetic whose fictional worlds and persona frame or showcase the implied subjectivity of the poet or novelist.

The distinction noted by Culler between the lyric tradition and modern poetry is also behind the implacable separation by modern poets of lyrics – especially pop and rock lyrics – from poetry, including Walker’s. In her Preface to *Sundog*, Eimear McBride looks at the common critical assumption that songwriters, ‘even exceptional ones are rarely poets. As Simon Armitage commented in his 2010 *Guardian* interview with Morrisey – in response to Morrissey’s description of the bestowal of poet-hood upon him—“In fact Morrissey isn’t a poet … poets write poems requiring no backbeat, no melody and no performance.” (xvii) Don Paterson in *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (2018) makes a similar point that the writer of song lyrics has to strip out the ‘musicality’ of poetry in order for it to be enhanced by actual music. It seems to me that the reference to musicality misses the point and is something of a red herring – the pre-modern lyric tradition was always musical in the sense that in order to produce lines that were memorable, it deployed rhythm, repetition, rhyme and foregrounded the role of ‘mellifluous voicing’ (Culler, 7). It was much closer to song (when it wasn’t actually song). Indeed, Culler draws an analogy between the lyric poem and pop music, arguing that the readers of the pre-modern lyric ‘appreciated poems as much as we do songs’, taking them to directly address the world (rather than constructing a fictional one), readers and listeners learning (voluntarily or even involuntarily) specific memorable lines, humming or singing them to themselves or to others, verbal fragments operating as charms, aphorisms, clichés or even earworms. The difference between the two traditions is not ‘musicality’, it is that the modern poem aspires to the condition of the actual speech of a subject or ‘persona’. It is speech that provides the horizon for the modern poem, while for the lyric it is song. Pop lyricists that are critically acclaimed -- like Morrissey for Armitage – are generally very mimetic writers, novelistic in the sense that they produce fictional discourse, tell little stories with characters. Bob Dylan’s epic narratives, supremely, but also the tradition represented by Ray Davis of the Kinks whose novelistic vignettes construct precise social settings (‘Waterloo Sunset’), and involve dramatic dialogue (‘Lola’) and so on. For Culler, ‘lyrics do not in general performatively create a fictional universe, as novels are said to do, but make claims (quite possibly figurative ones) about our world.’ (128) Often in Morrissey’s case, it seems to me, mimesis is merely handmaiden to his way of making provocative statements to himself or no one in particular that might ‘address and illuminate the world’ (or not): ‘Does the body rule the mind, or does the mind rule the body? I dunno’ (The Smiths, ‘Still Ill’, 1984).

Culler argues that rather than mimesis or representation, there are four features that define the lost logic of the lyric: enunciative apparatus, hyperbole, ritual and event. The lyric event, iterated in ritual makes claims on the actual (as opposed to fictional) world at the core of which is the singular, enigmatic event of enunciation itself. Walker’s lyrics aren’t fiction, they are always some kind of enigmatic statement, even though they certainly contain fictional elements.

In ‘The Boston Green Head’, for example, Atum the sun-god who breaks the diurnal chain of being, is situated in a position of equivalence with an ancient (380-343 BC) sculpture in rare, precious graywacke sandstone of the head of an Egyptian priest, assumed to be a eunuch. The statue was probably initially looted by Persians from its temple in Memphis where it stood in 343 BC. Exhumed by a French archaeologist in the nineteenth century, and miraculously awoken from its death-slumber, the statue’s head, sundered from his body, and its nose sheared off, becomes the vehicle for the ventriloquism of a monstrous yet mellifluous voice that resounds from a site of enunciation in discordance with its represented or narrative being. While the statue has a historical reference – Lawrence Berman’s book *The Priest, the Prince and the Pasha* (2015) provides an account of the ‘life and afterlife’ of the sculpture[[1]](#footnote-1) – this is simply the opening premise in the song for a direct address to the libidinal violence of contemporary American society from the notional perspective of an ancient, priestly ‘eunuch’.

In the wake of the exhumation of the Green Head and its awakening, a menagerie of Egyptian animal deities descends on Boston. Anubis the jackal, Apis the bull, Basket the cat, Set the hippo and Sobek the crocodile create havoc to the strains of the local ‘Hate-Fuck Radio’ on the American airwaves broadcast by the Hate-Fuck Free clan. They run amok as ‘rooster fish’ gawp from burning buildings and serpents swarm through the sewers. The evocation of chaos that is conveyed in the plosive pleasure of verbal play, is intercut with the Green Head’s lament for its loss: loss of the sleep of death, for its loss of part of its face, for the loss of its body and its gelded potency. Plucked out of the ground, the Green Head is plunged into a war between Atum, the self-created God who brings other gods into existence through his prodigious feats of masturbation, and the death-driven Hate-Fuck Clan who are filled with populist jealousy and resentment. It is a fabulous evocation and intervention into the apocalyptic clash of global and local politics.

‘The Boston Green Head’ is similar in its anachronistic (a)historical reach to ‘SDSS1416+13B (Zercon, A Flagpole Sitter’) from *Bish Bosh* (2013). This song is a 22-minute epic that deploys the device of a historical character being heckled by silence. Like the Green Head, Zercon lives through many millennia but in very different forms – from a court jester in the Court of Attila the Hun to an astral body freezing in deep space. As with the Green Head, the fictional reality of the character and various historical or cosmological settings are not mimetic in the sense of being realist scenes for the dramatization of a poetic persona. Zercon’s lyrical dedications (‘For Lavinia / who goes like a gynozoon’), exclamations (Norsemen! DO NOT! Eat the big pink mint’), groans and whimpers, clearly do not offer a subjective unity. Various scenes and references are literary semblance that set off the reality of the voice which is always cut off from the music, floating in the middle of the high and low mix of sound, and which retains the same tonality, bearing no relation to the mouths of the characters from which it supposedly proceeds. The epideictic lyric tradition makes sense of Walker’s strange combination of rhetorical, verbal invention and straining emotion that is devoid of subjectivity – there are no ‘soul inflexions’, as he says in Kijak’s documentary, no ‘personality’. The characters are not ‘poetic personas’ but monstrous emanations, manifestations of a voice that he describes as ‘alien’ or a ‘beast’ (see Kobel below). The sound-music that comprises the great blocks of sound and silence of these late works that surround, batter, harangue and harry the voice set off the ‘ritual’ element of the voicing of the lyrics, the formal means through which the enigma of enunciation addresses the real of existence and its discordance with the always already fictionalized being in the world.

With the new songs in *Sundog* one cannot hear the voice, of course, just imagine it. Even so, the words-on-the-page in the absence of any recording of Walker’s voice, emphasises even more the tension between the ritualistic and fictional elements in the rich deployment of direct address, apostrophe, hyperbole, meter, rhythm, sound and repetition along with nonsense verse, nursery rhyme, literary allusion, quotation, song-within-the-song, and fragments of dialogue, some of which seem to serve as instructions for performance and others that work to evoke character and event: ‘Hey Diddle-diddle, squeezed my toothpaste from the middle / Tartare wrapped around a tranq’ (‘Black Backing’) ‘Brah!’ ‘Bruugh!’ (‘Pitt’s), ‘He’s a two bag dog / he’s a three bag dog’) (‘Sundog’). The lyrics of ‘Sundog’ consisting mostly of the repetition of the word ‘dog’ and the rhythmic counting of bags. The incantatory repetition of ‘dreamed into’ throughout the fourth and second sections of ‘Barracuda’ is juxtaposed to the literary use of assonance and alliteration in the other sections (‘Nubbin Knob knuckled to brain nock’).

III *Meaning vs significance; fiction vs dreaming-into*

‘Barracuda’ is the final lyric in *Sundog*. It has a clear structure laid out on the page in a formal pattern. In 2008 Walker explained to journalist Sean O’Hagen how he came to write lyrics in ‘blocks of words’ laid out like ‘soldiers in a field’. ‘There’s a lot of white space which represents me in a sense. It’s an abstract way of putting it, but I see it that way visually.’ (Walker in O’Hagen, 2008).

There are three blocks of words in ‘Barracuda’ repeated twice. The opposing armies in ‘Barracuda’ that open each chain of blocks appropriately allude to colonial atrocities in the late nineteenth century: the rubber boom (1879-1912) that saw the displacement of indigenous peoples and the industrialization of the Amazonian basin, and the siege and massacre of Khartoum (1884-5). The second two blocks, repeated after the first in each case, hone in on broken body parts and organs infected by insects and poisoned by toxic flowers: bladders, bones, back, soulless eyes; and then brain, stomach, and eyes whose geopoetic materiality outface the darkest stars of the cosmos. The movement from the first to the second block illustrates the familiar process whereby Walker’s songs start from something explicitly political and then drift into something disturbingly intimate, an intimacy that can take on cosmic, non-human dimensions (see Chaudhry below). A big sonorous rhyme provides the sonic note of consistency across these two sections. Not just ‘rubber boom’ / ‘Khartoum’ but also ‘room’, ‘nom-de-spume’, ‘fume’, ‘plume’, ‘broom’, the diphthong functioning as the verbal equivalent of the kind of ‘big block of sound’ that structures so many of his songs particularly from *The Drift* (2005) to *Bish Bosch* (2013).

Throughout the body-part section an interlocutor is addressed: a ‘you’ whose body is a suffering burden. This person is first invoked negatively as an exception to everyone else, and then as an unlimited category of unknowns: ‘You’re everyone you never knew’. As he relates to O’Hagen in the *Observer* interview, the white spaces on the page are as important as the words themselves, because paradoxically they ‘represent me’. The author is there on the page, but as a conditioning absence visually represented by empty space – as he would be correlatively in the gaps in the song and the silences on the record. In the interview, Walker also re-iterates that his aim when he writes is to ‘say the unsayable’, another paradox that he admits is impossible (see also Potts, below). Drawing an analogy between the blocks of words and the big blocks of ‘raw and stark’ ‘emotional noise’, the ‘alien’ voice that we imagine singing the words or hear on the record is not therefore the ‘me’ represented by the silence and the blank page. In ‘Barracuda’ we can surmise that the ‘you’ that is addressed in the lyrics as both an absent exception to ‘everyone’, on the one hand, and the unlimited ‘everyone’ that one can never know, on the other, is ‘me’ deictically situated in the place of the listener, all potential listeners alive or yet to be born. The lyric voice weirdly addresses its site of enunciation and audition as the same, but also as absolutely singular, multiple, unknowable and yet non-existent.

The meaning of the song – authorial or indeed interpreted – is likewise absent, but also conditioning. The words and the voice call for it because they are not it themselves. Walker’s lyric poems demand interpretation, set up the poetic conditions whereby meaning is called for, but frustrate it by not constructing a consistent, representative, fictional world that makes sense. But if the songs are thus empty of meaning, they are nevertheless full of significance. The absent meaning is the ‘void that holds’ as Heidegger says of the ‘Thing’ (Heidegger, 1975: 169). This fullness is an effect of the ‘sayable’ that misses its object resonating with the ‘unsayable’ that pushes signification towards the verbal excesses for which Walker’s late work is noted (the obscure words, the puns, equivoques and grammatical oddities). Again, from the perspective of the reader or auditor, the fullness of signification is an effect of the interpretation that fails. Consolation for that failure thus falls back on the sonorous pleasure of the words themselves. The ‘nubbin knobs’ that ‘knuckle’ your ‘brain nock’. It is interesting here that the brain is regarded as just another body part, an organ that suffers, and through suffering speaks or sings; this is not the speech of a subject of representation, but pure signification empty of meaning yet full of the mystery of dreaming flesh.

The third section is comprised of rhythmic couplets, and would no doubt have formed the ‘chorus’ of the song, in which the line ‘dreamed into barracuda’ is alternated with a line in which ‘barracuda’ is replaced by a series of phrases evoking religious, murderous, lyrical and dead desires, all linked by the rhyme with ‘desires’: ‘shining spires’, ‘razor wires’, ‘choirs’, ‘burning tyres’, ‘lyres’, and so on. The different terms in the series are thus all brought into an equivalence with the word ‘barracuda’, a fierce, tropical carnivorous fish. The phrase ‘dreamed into …’ is curious here; evidently it is not a question of a subject (even a subject of the unconscious) ‘dreaming *of*’ something but of something merging with or becoming something else. The dream, then, is not so much a mental representation or fiction for the dramatization of repressed desire, but a mode of transmission and transformation with … what? With language, or whatever it is that language attempts but fails to say.

Dreams are an extremely important reference for Walker. On numerous occasions he has claimed that dreams are the inspiration for his songs both in the sense of their frequently nightmarish dream material but more importantly the model they provide for what they do. Songs take the structure of a dream, such as ‘The Cockfighter’ from *Tilt* (1995) or in ‘Farmer in the City’ or ‘Clara’ from *The Drift* where it is also the dream of a dead man. In the documentary *30th Century Man*, Walker comments on the composition of these songs: ‘Often I’ll take a political idea, or an idea that we all know, and that’s a springboard to another place, to another sort of world … Everything in my world – because I have a very nightmarish imagination, I’ve had bad dreams all my life. Everything in my world is way out of proportion’. (Kijak, 2006). Dreaming provides a passage to another sort of world, but not it seems a comforting one, or the representation of a wish or desire. In ‘Barracuda’, desires are dead, so we must assume that what is at stake is an impulse or a drive to dream *into* something conventionally signified as spiritually or artistically elevated or violently depraved, but which essentially is something unspeakable, beyond representation. This is actually quite close to the understanding that Freud came to with regard to the dream following his analysis of patients who had returned from war unharmed, but who could not free themselves of terrifying nightmares and visions.

Freud’s idea about the nightmare is that it confronts the dreamer with the reality of trauma, but wakes the dreamer up. The awakening allows the dreamer to avoid the trauma and carry on in the ‘dream’ or illusion of everyday life. In the version of the dream as wish fulfilment, the dream is a fantasy, a fiction; in the second version the nightmare is psychically real – and can even draw on events actually happening in reality, such as in Freud’s account of the dream of the burning child from *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In Freud’s account of this dream a father, whose unconscious has no doubt been prompted by the sound of a candle falling onto the body of his dead son in his coffin, dreams that his son comes to him and says ‘Father don’t you see I’m burning?’ For Jacques Lacan, ‘there is more reality in the message [that is dreamt] than in the noise of the candle that fell over’ (see Miller, 2019: 33).

I think this is what Walker seeks to achieve in some of his best songs, and its method is being chorused in ‘Barracuda’. On the basis of some political or familiar event, Walker seeks to ‘dream into’ that which is psychically real and sustain and prolong it through the song-nightmare beyond the social reality shaped by discourse, thereby disclosing its fictionality. The classical form of the lyric – as opposed to the modern poem – *dreamed into* the contemporary pop and rock song results in a type of literary deformity that directly addresses and confronts the world with the full significance of Barracuda.

The essays that follow explore where the real is figured not just psychically and lyrically but also sonically, vocally, spatially, geopoetically and in the world’s virtual and actual desolation.

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1. In the book Berman speculates that ‘our Priest would have witnessed the second Persian invasion and seen the temples ransacked and their treasures carried away. He may have witnessed the destruction of his own statue’. (162) The head, interred for over two millennia, was excavated by accident – its nose being sheared off by an archaeologist’s spade – when French Egyptologist François Auguste Ferdinand Mariette was sent to visit Coptic monasteries to inventory manuscripts, but was diverted to Saqqara, the ancient burial ground of Memphis in search of treasures associated with the subterranean tombs of Apis the sacred bull. Following a number of exchanges documented by Berman, the Green Head now resides in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)